

## Chapter 1

"So, what do you say?"

Harry looked at Bagman with disbelief. What was he playing at? But then Harry checked himself. He didn't have much going on his favour other than this one thing. He had been thrown into a tournament where participants were known to lose their lives. He had been abandoned by his best friends. He had become a pariah in the school. He was being vilified in the media. He was having nightmares of a dark lord.

What a fool would he be to let go of the one silver lining in the clouds of misery? After all, it wasn't as if he truly cared about winning or losing. All he wanted was to survive the year, as usual.

"Okay," Harry nodded. He shook Bagman's hand; a deal was made between the Boy Who Lived and the Director of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. "Thanks."

Bagman grinned widely. One would think he had an ulterior motive in helping Harry win the tournament. "Excellent," said Bagman happily. He finished his drink. "I would offer to buy you another drink, Harry, but I'm afraid I just spent the last galleon I had in my coin bag."

"That's fine," said Harry. "I'll get it." He got up and walked to the bar and Madam Rosmerta served him a butterbeer for himself and a pint of lager for Bagman. He went back to his seat and saw Bagman was scribbling on a piece of parchment.

"I'm writing a list of spells you must learn before the first task," said Bagman. "The first two should be sufficient, of course. But why take a risk?"

"Can't you just tell me what's coming?" asked Harry.

Bagman sighed regretfully. "I am under oath not to tell anyone what's coming or take part in the training of any of the champions." But he grinned. "However, nothing stops me from telling a young and smart wizard a few spells to learn to prepare himself for the cruel world."

Harry knew just how cruel the world could be.

"But not to worry," said Bagman. "Learn the first two spells as fast as you can, and as many of the others as possible. And don't forget to ask a girl for the Yule Ball."

"The Yule... what?"

Bagman was surprised. "Hasn't Dumbledore announced the Ball yet? There's always a Yule Ball as part of the Tournament, and the Champions open the dancing. You should ask someone before all the good ones are taken." He chuckled, winking at Harry. "Not that you should have any problem... Boy Who Lived... Triwizard Champion... Youngest Seeker in a century..."

Harry's ears turned pink.

"Just a word of advice," Bagman continued. "A lot of important people will be in Hogwarts for the First Task and the Yule Ball. It won't hurt you at all to make a good impression with them."

For a moment Harry's mind screamed out 'LOCKHART' but he held back from commenting and waited for Bagman to elaborate.

"After all," said Bagman, "you won't be in Hogwarts forever. In the real world, you are as successful as your list of contacts in the outside world."

"So, you are saying," Harry began thoughtfully, "people I meet in Hogwarts don't matter?"

Bagman chuckled and shook his head. "No, I don't mean that at all. But they're all at the same stage as you, even those in their final years currently. It is the more senior people in various spheres of employment with whom you need to cultivate relationships, even if you don't really like the person."

"Like Lucius Malfoy?" Harry asked sharply.

Bagman grimaced. "Don't put words into my mouth, Harry," he chided Harry. "It could be anyone from the Minister of Magic to the driver of the Knight Bus. It really depends on what you want to do with your life."

"I really don't know," Harry admitted.

"And there's no reason why you should," said Bagman. "Not at this age at least. Just keep an open mind and make use of the advantage you have over others. Important people are willing to give time to you. Talk to them and understand different career options." He finished his drink. "You should head back before it gets dark. There's over a fortnight left, which isn't a lot of time. Remember what I said, the first two spells."

Harry nodded. He pushed the parchment inside his robes and looked at him gratefully. Without the help of Hermione, who along with Ron had abandoned him in the belief he was lying to them, he doubted he had much of a chance in the tournament. Bagman's offer was godsend, and he couldn't believe he had nearly given it up.

Harry walked back to the school, ignoring the superior smirks he was receiving from everyone, including many whom he had never spoken to. He walked straight to the library, took an empty table in a quiet corner and unfolded the parchment given by Bagman.

1. Flame-Freezing Charm... prevent getting burnt from fire
2. Conjunctivitis Curse... temporary blindness on target
3. Geminio... create clones of yourself for distraction
4. Avis Oppugno... conjure attacking birds for distraction
5. Contego... shield for solid objects instead of spells

"Wow," said Harry. He spent the next hour finding books which would have the curses and copied the relevant information, that is incantation, wand movement and any other special notes for each of them.

Contego and Avis Oppugno were the simplest of the two, but Harry forced himself to learn them in order. Only when it approached curfew time did he realize he had been in the library for well over five hours and had missed dinner. He sighed when Madam Pince came to him.

"Can I borrow some of these books?" he asked hopefully. "It's just that I don't have much time before the First Task and the other Champions know a lot more than me."

The stern librarian held his gaze for a few moments, and in a rare show of sympathy, nodded. "That's an odd collection, if you don't mind me saying. Charms, Offensive Magic, Defensive magic and Conjuraton."

Harry hesitated, trying to think of a cover to protect Bagman. "I figured I'd learn a few from a lot of different areas because they didn't tell us what's coming and I just want to get this done with."

Madam Pince was slightly surprised at his answer. "Take any one book you want, Mr Potter," she said kindly. "If you come to return it early tomorrow morning, I will teach you that Geminio spell you were trying to practice a while ago. It is a charm a librarian uses often to make duplicate copies lasting of books for the use of students."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Thanks, Madam Pince," he said gratefully. "I'll see you tomorrow."

That night Harry entered the common room too late for anyone but Hermione Granger and a few other dedicated students working on their homework.

"You'll get into trouble, Harry," Hermione stated in a bland tone, a hint of concern dripping into her voice. "You took a book out of the library."

Harry glared at her. "What's it to you? I thought you weren't speaking to me." Without another word, he stalked up the stairs to his dorm.

He was glad that everyone was sound asleep, as it allowed him to light his wand at a dim intensity and read the book on his bed.

The Flame-Freezing Charm literally made one immune to fire and heat. So clearly there was the threat of fire in the first task. Harry cast a silencing charm and then spoke out, "Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo."

He felt a slight tingle of magic. He repeated the incantation again. He repeated it a third time. That's when he felt a rush of magic leaving from his wand and he took a deep breath.

To test it, he quietly got out of his bed and walked back to the common room. It was empty by then and Harry walked to the fireplace. He could feel the heat and that disappointed him. He brought his finger near the fire and it became hotter.

Sighing, he moved back and tried repeating the incantation. But he couldn't remember what came after the second Flamma and had to refer to his notes. He decided to first commit the incantation to memory.

A few minutes later, he raised his wand, and chanted the incantation again. He felt the rush of magic and eagerly walked towards the fire. This time he couldn't feel the heat and slowly brought his finger towards the fire. With sudden daring, he pushed it forward and gasped in surprise when his hand touched the fire without any effect on him.

He pulled back and smiled triumphantly. The next thing to check was how long the charm lasted. He stared at his watch with his finger dangerously close to the fire. When the heat suddenly became obvious, he pulled out and checked his watch.

"Only five minutes," he muttered to himself, slightly disappointed. He would have to cast the charm every five minutes.

He returned to his dorm, completely oblivious that he was being observed by Hermione, who had been in the common room all along in an armchair facing away from him. But he returned to his bed. The adrenaline of having learnt the first of Bagman's recommended spells in the first night itself made him unable to sleep and he flicked through the pages of the advanced charms book he had brought.

But he spent the next half an hour learning some fun charms instead of preparing for the First Task, as a reward for his quick study, including a hair loss charm, a hair-thickening charm and a flatulence hex.

The next morning, he stayed true to his word. He left the dorm before most of his dorm mates had woken up and grabbed a few

slices of toast and rushed to the library. Madam Pince smiled on seeing him, for what Harry believed, was the first time in his life.

"The first thing you need to know about charms is the classification they fall under," said Madam Pince. "This is ordinarily taught in seventh year but I personally believe it to be the most fundamental theory in charms. Some charms are long-lasting, some are short and others only last while the spell-caster is focusing his magic on the target."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "So, the Flame-Freezing Charm falls into the short term category?" he asked.

"Yes, precisely," said Madam Pince. "And Wingardium Leviosa belongs to the final category. The moment you release your wand, the levitating object falls."

"How long are the other two?" asked Harry.

"Short term charms can be anything between a few seconds to a few hours, depending on the amount of magic you pour into it," said Madam Pince. "Long-lasting ones are generally more than a few hours to a few days, and occasionally, if powered through another focus, can have the effect of near permanence."

"Really?" Harry was shocked. "Professor Flitwick told us no charm can be permanent."

"And he is right, of course," said Madam Pince sternly, "which is why I said you need another focus to sustain it. But moving on, the Geminio Charm falls under the short term category. The charm only lasts for a few minutes to a few hours."

"How do I control it?"

"With experience," said Madam Pince, who didn't sound like she liked being interrupted. Harry shut his mouth. "The spell as you know is Geminio. The wand-movement is this." She showed it to him. "What is less known is the different forms of this charm. Geminio Sextus makes six duplicates. Geminio Decimus makes ten, and so on."

Harry spent the next hour learning how to make duplicate copies of books, and only when other students started coming into the library did Madam Pince stop and frown at him.

"Don't you have classes this morning?"

Harry hesitated. "I have History," he said. "But I'm exempted from classes and exams this year, so I'm only going for those that teach things useful and necessary for OWLs."

"And you're saying History isn't useful?" Madam Pince's lips thinned.

Harry became cautious, he didn't want to lose her good graces. Something Hermione had mentioned earlier in the year came to his mind. "This year's course is about the goblin rebellions before the tenth century. They are not examinable in the OWLs next year."

Madam Pince nodded slowly. "I suppose you do have other priorities this year. But I cannot teach you, in good faith, while you are missing a class. You may study by yourself. If you are unable to do this charm on your own, then come again tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Madam Pince. I think I'll manage by myself now," he said. "If you ever need help making duplicate copies of books..."

"I'll call you," she promised.

Harry scanned the library. The Gryffindors and Slytherins were in History so the only faces he saw from his year were from Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. He checked himself; the only faces he ever saw in the library other than Hermione were Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs.

He knew he wasn't welcome with the badgers because he had 'stolen their glory' and the Ravenclaws were close to the Hufflepuffs, so he decided to leave. He wandered around the castle, something which he liked doing by himself occasionally, and just exploring different corridors and pathways – steering clear of Slytherin, of course – and he was doing that again.

"Ow," Harry cried out, when something hard hit the back of his head.

"Bulls-eye!" Peeves cheered. He was floating about a dozen feet away, with an armful of chalk, and he was shooting them at Harry.

Another one came zooming towards Harry, but with the swift reflexes he had been training as a Seeker since his first year, Harry dodged it. He whisked his wand out and yelled, "Contego!"

A solid bright silver sheet appeared in front of him and the chalk hit it harmlessly. Harry released the shield, and saw Peeves with a malicious grin, flying around the corridor, to get better access to him. Harry steadied his hand and waited. He spent the next couple of minutes summoning his solid shield to ward off the rest of Peeves chinks.

To his shock, when the poltergeist ran out of ammunition, he descended to the floor and burst out in tears. "Potty's no fun..." Peeves was crying. "Peevsey missed every time after the first... Potty's makin' a mockery of poor ol' Peevsey... what will the other ghosties say when they find o-ou' abou' this... P-Peevsey will b-become the laughin' stock of the undead c-community... Potty's a meanie..."

Harry was taken aback. "Don't be upset," he said strangely, and walked closer to pat his back. But as Peeves was a poltergeist, Harry's hands went straight through him. "I won't say a word to any other ghost or human about this, and you can try again tomorrow. Maybe you'll get me next time."

Peeves froze. He looked at Harry with disbelief and hope.

"Twelve shots," said Harry. "Come when I'm alone."

"With dung bombs?" asked Peeves hopefully.

"No," said Harry, a little too loudly. "Because... because... dung bombs should be left for the final round if it's a draw between us."

"That makes sense," agreed Peeves. "Potty's nice to Peevsey. Peevsey be nice to Potty from now on. Potty and Peevsey are new best friends." He soared to the ceiling and disappeared through it, in considerably high spirits.



Harry groaned at his new unholy alliance. "What have I done?" He heard a laugh behind him and was startled. He turned around and realized he had an audience.

"That was... interesting."

Harry looked at the girl who had been observing him. His eyes involuntarily fell on the 'Support Cedric Diggory' badge, which chose that moment to turn into 'Potter's a Cheater'. All good humour left his face.

"Can I help you?" asked Harry quietly.

The girl saw where he was looking and turned slightly red. She quickly nudged the badge to make it revert to its original 'Support Cedric Diggory' message, and she looked at him apologetically. "House unity," she tried to explain. "Hufflepuff loyalty. I have to wear it."

Harry shrugged. "I don't care if you do."

"I think you do care," she said. "The way you cared that Peeves was upset shows how sensitive you are. I think you do care."

Harry frowned, but before he could argue she spoke again.

"I'll leave," she said hurriedly. "I can see you don't want to talk to me." She turned around and walked away.

Harry gave her a few moments and then took the same route that led to the great hall. He hadn't had a proper meal since lunch the previous day and was starving. He sat down between Neville and Ginny, ignoring Ron and Hermione completely, and dug in.

"How's your preparation going?" Ginny asked. Harry turned to her, and her cheeks turned slightly red.

"I'm managing," Harry forced himself to be civil, not wanting to take out his anger on someone who didn't deserve it. "I'm learning some advanced charms."

"Harry," Neville suddenly spoke out. He looked nervous. "If you need help... I know I'm not much... that is..."

"Me too," Ginny blurted out, before turning her head back to hide a blush.

Surprised, Harry managed to smile at them, feeling a sudden warmth inside him. Ron, Hermione, Gryffindor and Hogwarts had turned in majority against him. But that didn't include everyone. He hadn't realised that there were some who wanted to stay friends with him. "Thanks," he said, his voice was a bare whisper, and he could see from the corner of his eye, Hermione, sitting opposite Neville, was looking like she wanted to say something.

"There's something I was going to try after lunch," said Harry. "But I'd like someone to be with me in case I mess up."

The three of them left the great hall and proceeded to an empty classroom after lunch.

"Ginny, do you know how to cast Aguamenti?" he asked, and the girl nodded. "Neville, do you know how to cast Incendio?" Neville nodded. "Okay, this will sound weird, but you both have to trust me. When I give the signal, Neville cast Incendio on me." He ignored their shocked expressions, and continued, "Ginny, when I turn to you, get rid of the fire. Until I turn to you, don't do anything."

Then, without another word, Harry chanted, "Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo." He felt the tingle of magic, and then nodded at Neville.

A stream of fire hit Harry and he was covered in flames. But the flames neither hurt his body nor his clothes, they just stayed there. Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He kept muttering the spell softly every minute or two, "Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo." Madam Pince had said that the charm was a short term one, so if he kept casting it repeatedly, and got into the habit of doing so, it would become second nature for him to continually repeat the Flame-Freezing Charm for however long it required in the task.

Finally, after about twenty minutes of letting the fire stay on him, he turned to Ginny, and was washed in a powerful jet of water. Harry coughed when some of it got into his mouth.

"I'm sorry!" Ginny exclaimed. "I didn't mean to make it so strong."

"Don't worry; better too much than too little," Harry cleared his throat, and shook the excess water off him. But Ginny cast a spell that instantly dried him. Harry was impressed. "That's handy."

"I've seen mum do it," said Ginny. She sounded awed. "That was amazing, seeing you covered in fire and taking it as if it wasn't anything at all. Wasn't it, Neville?"

Neville nodded. But he was looking at Harry curiously. "Do you know what's coming in the first task?"

Harry shook his head. "Bagman advised me to learn this spell," he paused when he saw Ginny's eyes widen in outrage. "What?"

"Charlie wrote to us," said Ginny, she sounded annoyed. "He'll be here for the First Task." She paused for a moment, and when Harry and Neville waited for her to continue, she rolled her eyes. "He works in a dragon reserve."

Harry paled.

"I thought Ron would have told you," said Ginny. "We've known since the first week of term."

Harry didn't respond to her comment. "Dragons," he repeated in a daze.

"Harry, I have faith in you," said Neville. "You'll do fine."

Ginny nodded. "See, you're already immune to the fire..." But she looked worried as well.

Harry looked at the two of them. He was touched by their concern and support, feeling ashamed for not thinking of them more before that day. Both Ginny and Neville were loners, and although he had always thought of them as friends, he didn't feel like he deserved their friendship to this extent.

"I have to learn the spells Bagman told me to," Harry determined. "He must have known of the dragons, so he must know what would work against them. I have to trust him."

"How are you getting along?" asked Neville.

"He gave me five spells," said Harry. "I think I'm quite good with this one. Madam Pince has been teaching me the Geminio Charm. I think Bagman expects me to make clones of myself to distract the dragon. I have been teaching myself the Contego shield, and Peeves is helping me master it."

"Peeves?" Ginny was shocked.

"Don't ask," Harry was too embarrassed to talk of it. "He'll be throwing dung bombs at me for the next few days and I have to shield myself." The other two looked at him sympathetically. "That leaves Avis Oppugno and the Conjunctivitis Curse."

"I've seen Angelina cast Avis Oppugno on Fred and George before," said Ginny. "You could ask her... never mind." She turned red when she saw Harry's darkened expression and realized that Angelina was one of the many in Hogwarts who didn't like the fact that Harry was a Champion.

"I'm going to practice the Geminio Charm on other objects for the rest of the evening," said Harry. "You guys are welcome to stay or leave. Thanks, I really appreciate your help."

"I'll head to the library," said Ginny, "and find books on dragons to see if there's anything else useful you can learn."

Neville thought for a moment before nodding. "I'll help you, Ginny. But I have a class in half an hour."

Harry watched them leave before returning to his spells. He was quite pleased with his progress. But he remembered quite well that the only offensive spell in that list, the conjunctivitis curse, was still to be learnt.

The next few days went by with Harry practising his list of spells given by Bagman, while Neville and Ginny were busy making a new list. Professor Moody had suggested that he should try to outfly the dragon instead but he decided against it. He already had a plan and he should stick to it. The idea was to blind the dragon, distract it so it couldn't hear his movements, and all the time be invincible to its fire.

A few days before the First Task, Harry wondered if Cedric Diggory knew about the dragons and felt bothered. If he didn't, then he wouldn't have prepared hard enough. Harry decided the right thing to do would be to go and warn him. He headed towards the direction where Hufflepuffs usually went after dinner, and was accosted in a corridor by a group of Hufflepuffs in his year.

"Well, well, well," said Zacharias Smith. "If it isn't St. Potter Scarhead."

"I see you've been hanging around with Malfoy, Smith!" Harry shot back.

"Watch your mouth, Potter," Ernie Macmillan shot at him. "There's five of us here and just you. I'd be scared if I were you."

"That explains why you're not in Gryffindor then," said Harry.

"Ernie, don't, he's not worth it," Justin Finch-Fletchley stopped his friend before he took out his wand. "Besides, he might set his pet snake on us again."

"That's right," said Zacharias. "You call yourself a Gryffindor, Potter. When's the last time you've heard what the Gryffindors say of you? A snake in lion's skin, that's what you are."

"Guys, we should go," said the girl who had seen him with Peeves. "He doesn't mean any harm."

"How can you defend him, Susan?" Zacharias turned to her with narrowed eyes. "After how he stole Cedric's glory and demeaned Hufflepuff again! He's a scumbag, worse than Malfoy!"

Harry lost control. "Listen," he said in a low voice that made the others pause and turn to him. "I didn't put my name in nor did I want to enter this damned thing. And until now, I've only been trying to survive this tournament. But now... now, I'm giving you my word. I'm going to win. I will beat your Cedric Diggory and show that I'm a much better wizard than him. And do you know why? Because you pissed me off right now." He took a deep breath and turned around, letting go of his plan to warn Cedric.

But he had barely walked for a minute when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned around and reached for his wand.

"Don't point that at me," Susan Bones looked irritated at finding a wand aimed at her face. "I came to apologise."

"Why?"

"They're idiots for saying what they did," said Susan. "But this isn't about this tournament... or you, Potter."

Harry waited for her to elaborate.

"You like taking the moral high-ground against us," Susan went on, "but have you ever considered things from our point of view? In our second year, Hufflepuff would have won the House Cup, but somehow, a few days before the end of term, Gryffindor was up from last place by four hundred points overnight awarded to you and Weasley. Then, several Hufflepuff students with as good grades as Granger wanted to take more than two electives in third year, but McGonagall refused, saying we won't be able to handle the workload. My aunt told me McGonagall got a special time turner from the Ministry so Granger could get what was refused to us."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Just that this isn't about you or the tournament," said Susan again. "Hufflepuff is the most downtrodden house in Hogwarts. For the first time, at least since my arrival, we got something good... Cedric Diggory, a Hufflepuff, was Hogwarts Champion... for the first time, we felt proud to be Hufflepuffs... for the first time, we weren't ashamed or embarrassed of our house... For the first time, Potter..."

"You think I took that away," finished Harry. He hesitated. "But it wasn't my doing. I didn't want any of this."

"I think... I think I do believe you," admitted Susan. "But that doesn't change the fact that you're the easiest target to direct our anger and frustration at."

"It's always me," Harry shook his head. "The Chamber of Secrets... now this..."

"Yeah, well," Susan shrugged, as if that was obvious. "You're the only famous person around. It wouldn't be as much fun with anyone else." She grinned when Harry looked at her indignantly and mouthed 'fun' incredulously. "Anyway, I told the others I was going to the toilet. They'll wonder what's taking me so long." She hesitated. "Good luck."

Harry nodded. He too hesitated when she turned to leave and blurted out, "Dragons."

"Excuse me," said Susan, looking at him with confusion.

"The First Task," said Harry. "I was trying to find Cedric Diggory earlier. The First Task involves dragons, and that's all I know about it. The other Champions also know... I've seen them research dragons in the library... Can you tell Cedric?"

Susan looked at him silently for a few moments, as if trying to decide if he was being truthful or not, and then she nodded. "I will. Thanks." She smiled at him warmly. "I guess I didn't misjudge you."

"This doesn't change the fact that I'm still going to beat him," said Harry, as his ears turned slightly red at her final words. He found that he quite enjoyed the sound of Susan's laughter as she walked away.

The morning of the First Task approached and Harry was woken up by Neville. Harry had stayed up late, practicing all the spells he had learnt – the five in Bagman's and a handful of others chosen by Ginny and Neville.

The three of them walked together, Harry completely avoided and ignored a handful of Gryffindors who were now beginning to show support to him, when the big day finally arrived. Unsurprisingly, Draco Malfoy, his goons, Pansy and her group dropped by his table for a few words of discouragement.

"Just so you know," said Draco. "I'm selling boxes of tissues for when you die and people mourn."

"In case you haven't noticed, other than Ginny and Neville, nobody's going to mourn my death," said Harry. "Bad business plan, Malfoy, and a shocking one considering your own contribution to the hate-

Potter campaign." He shook his head at the tissue boxes. "Doomed to fail from the start."

Draco was at a loss for several moments. But he picked himself swiftly and smirked. "Well, how about that? Potter's growing a funny bone."

"It's kind of hard not to," Harry shrugged, "what with all of you clowns around all the time." He got up. "Now, if you don't mind. There's a dragon waiting to be outclassed."

"Good luck," one of the girls from Pansy's group called out and covered her face when the other Slytherins turned to her in shock. Harry nodded at the girl gratefully and left.

Dragons were indeed involved in the first task. Four great fire breathing beasts were tied to their posts, guarding dozens of eggs, including a golden one amongst it. Bagman quickly explained the first task to the four champions and then called Harry outside the champions' tent.

"Harry, my boy, are you feeling all ready?" asked Bagman. "Rearing to go?" He was looking at Harry questioningly, but was trying to also hint to keep the answers vague.

Harry nodded. "I know a few decent spells that I think will be useful against dragons."

"I hope you get the most points," said Bagman eagerly. "I also hope you finish within thirty minutes."

For some reason, it felt to Harry that Bagman was putting altogether too much emphasis on those two aims. Then, suddenly it clicked in Harry's mind. During the Quidditch World Cup, he had seen what a compulsive gambling man Bagman was. What is to say he hadn't placed a few bets on the outcome of the Triwizard Tournament, and using his special position in the tournament to make things go in his favour.

"I will try," promised Harry.

He waited in the tent for his turn. Fleur Delacour was the first to leave, and then Viktor Krum.



"Thanks," said Cedric, when it was just the two of them. "Susan Bones gave me your tip. I had no clue."

Harry shrugged. "It wasn't fair otherwise. I've seen both Krum and Delacour check books on dragons in the library. I wasn't sure if you knew."

"So how did you do it?" he asked. "Get past Dumbledore's age-line?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest but then he paused. "If you don't believe me already, there's no point in talking about this. Look, Diggory, we're not friends, and you don't have to pretend just because I helped you a bit."

Cedric hesitated, but a remorseful look crossed his face. "I'll tell the others in my house to tone it down. I'm sorry about all the hostility you've been getting."

Before Harry could reply it was Cedric's turn to go. Harry waited patiently, thinking about how things had changed so swiftly in the past month. He was no longer Gryffindor's Golden Boy, cherished Seeker, member of the Golden Trio. But it wasn't too bad. He was seeing exactly whom he could depend on – Ginny and Neville, and he was discovering how much he enjoyed their company. And surprisingly, he was getting along with Peeves as well.

Soon, it was his turn. Harry stepped out. He could hear the cheers but ignored the crowd. Susan was correct; the only reason they vilified him was because he was the one who always stood in the stage. For the rest of his life, he would have to face their alternating devotion and condemnation. He couldn't change that. What he could change was how much it affected him.

"Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo," he chanted, with his wand held high.

The Hungarian Horntail roared mightily when he stepped closer. For a second there was silence, and then the spectators started laughing, because Harry's spell seemed to have no visible effect.

But then the dragon breathed out a wave of fire, and Harry allowed it to hit his face. He could hear the screams and cries from the crowd but ignored it.

"Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo," he repeated, giving him a fresh round of five minutes.

"Geminio Sextus." Harry pointed the wand at himself. Six clones of himself sprang into existence. "Distract the dragon, lead it away from the eggs."

The soulless clones did as they were told; two of them were burnt to cinders, but the others drew the dragon – whilst still chained – to a bit further than the eggs.

"Madrasaei," Harry sent a beam of red light to the dragon's eyes, and it roared in pain. The curse was temporary, making the dragon blind for a few minutes; while the four remaining clones kept distracting it away from the eggs.

"Flamma attero flamma consumo flamma everto flamma obruo," he repeated, and tried to sneak past the dragon to retrieve the golden egg.

The dragon was sending fire all around, but Harry wasn't bothered by it. The one thing that did bother him was the ferocious tail that came swiping the air to strike at him.

"Contego." Harry had been trained by Peeves to ward himself at the smallest hint of sudden movement; and his shield came in time to stop the dragon's horny tail. But the impact had tremendous momentum, which pushed Harry back. Fortunately for him, he was thrown back to a distance out of reach of the dragon's tail.

"Aguamenti," he washed off the fire attached to his robes, which disappeared without having hurt him at all. Then he dried himself using Ginny's charm, and walked towards the judges. Bagman was beaming at him, thoroughly proud of his performance.

"Take a look at that!" Bagman spoke in his amplified voice. "Our youngest champion has finished his task the fastest, in nine minutes, with no injuries and a display of magic much more profound than the

other champions. Full marks, by my reckoning. Please proceed to the medi-witch, just in case, Mr Potter."

Harry ignored the cheering crowd, choosing to flash a look of gratitude at Bagman and headed towards the medical tent. He was surprised, however, when he saw Ron and Hermione waiting for him there.

"Harry," he said, very seriously, "whoever put your name in that goblet — I — I reckon they're trying to do you in!" It was as though the last few weeks had never happened — as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he'd been made champion.

"Caught on, have you?" said Harry coldly. "Took you long enough."

Hermione stood nervously next to Ron and opened her mouth. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry we weren't there for you."

Harry saw Ginny and Neville also approaching and sighed. He looked at Ron and Hermione coldly. "If you don't mind, I'd like to celebrate with those who helped me survive the dragon today."

Hermione looked close to tears and Ron looked very ashamed of himself, but Harry ignored them. They slowly walked back to the stands.

"Harry, you were amazing!" Ginny gave him a quick hug, and then Neville clasped his hands.

"Thanks, guys," he said happily, glad not to be alone. "How did the others do?"

"Krum used the conjunctivitis curse too," said Neville. "But his dragon crushed several eggs after being turned blind. They penalised him for that. Delacour tried to enchant the dragon to fall asleep and it nearly worked, but it woke up right at the end and burnt her a bit. Diggory transfigured a boulder into a puppy to distract the dragon but it chose to turn its attention to the human."

Harry was surprised at hearing that. Surely, the three of them didn't think they could use only a single spell in the task. But that's what they did, and they were idiots. Suddenly, Harry felt a glow inside him. He had outclassed them. He could win the tournament.

"Your score," Ginny called out when the judges stood up. "It's being given by the three heads and three Ministry representatives from the different countries."

Dumbledore - 10

Karkaroff - 8

Maxime - 9

Crouch - 10

German Ministry representative - 10

French Ministry representative - 10

"Not bad," Neville nodded cheerfully. "Karkaroff gave Diggory a 2."

"Not bad?" Ginny looked at Neville in shock. "He's got the highest at 57, way ahead of Krum and the others... hey, Charlie's coming here..."

"Great Merlin, Potter," Charlie Weasley looked slightly miffed. "You make my hard years of training look like child's play." He chuckled. "Great going, mum will want to hear all about it." He hugged his sister, and then looked around. "Where's Ron?"

Harry paused, not knowing how to answer, but Ginny came to his rescue.

"Ron stopped being friends with Harry after he was chosen," said she. "Most of Gryffindor and Hogwarts turned their backs on him."

"What?" Charlie was shocked. "Why?"

"Jealousy and spite," Ginny spat out.

"They think I should have told them how I managed to get pass Dumbledore's age line," said Harry. "Nobody believes me that I didn't put my name in. They say I acted in an un-Gryffindorish manner and stole the limelight to myself."

Charlie looked at Harry sympathetically and gripped his shoulder. "They'll come around," he reassured. "Look, I have to go now; the dragons have to be taken back. Ginny, I'll write to you later."

"Bye," she waved at her older brother.

"You guys up for sneaking to Hogsmeade for a butterbeer?" asked Harry. "My treat."

"You bet," said Ginny, and Neville also nodded.

Soon, they were sitting in the Three Broomsticks and sipping a warm mug of butterbeer each. Others came to join them occasionally. Bagman was the first of them.

"Well done, Harry," Bagman was very pleased. "Very well done." He eyed the golden egg on Harry's lap and whispered conspiratorially, "I wouldn't open that here if I were you."

"Why not?"

Bagman shrugged. "Some languages do not make sense when conducted through air," he said. "They require a different mediums for comprehension. I really can't say more." He smiled at the other two. "You're Arthur's daughter, aren't you?"

"Ginny Weasley," she nodded and shook hands.

"Neville Longbottom," Neville introduced himself.

Bagman's eyes slightly misted. "I knew your father... We were in the same year in Hogwarts." For some reason Neville didn't want to continue the conversation, so he swiftly moved on. He placed another parchment in front of Harry, and he swiftly pushed inside his robes, assuming it to be another list of spells.

"Thanks," muttered Harry.

"Anyway, I'll see you on Christmas," said Bagman. "Don't forget to ask a girl to the ball."

Harry turned a little red, and Bagman left.

"You haven't asked anyone yet?" asked Neville in surprise.

"Have you?" Harry was surprised too. He saw both Neville and Ginny look at him guiltily. "You two are going?" He smiled, making them relax. But then he complained, "That means I can't go with Ginny."

Ginny turned a little red. But she made a playful retort, "You're assuming I would have said yes to you, Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes and said something that sounded like, "Elbows... butter dish..." and Ginny shut her mouth wisely. "Honestly, with this tournament, I haven't had time for thinking about the ball or whom I want to ask..."

"There must be someone in your mind," Ginny prompted.

"No," Harry shook his head. "No one at all." For a brief moment, the face of Cho Chang, a Ravenclaw Seeker, crossed his mind, but he recalled seeing her with Cedric Diggory, and pushed that thought away.

"You better hurry then," said Neville. "Seamus asked Lavender; and Dean is thinking of asking Mandy Brocklehurst."

"There's Hermione," Ginny pointed out.

"No," Harry shook his head resolutely.

"I thought you were going to forgive her," said Ginny.

"It's one thing to forgive a friend who made a mistake and a completely different thing to trust someone who let you down," said Harry. He shook his head. "I'm not asking Hermione."

"What about Tracey Davis?" asked Neville. "She's really pretty and wished you good luck when the Slytherins came over this morning."

"I'll think about it. Hey, isn't that Fred and George?"

The twins had sneaked into Three Broomsticks and were buying a crate of butterbeer. On seeing Harry, they walked over to him with broad smiles.

"Harry, old pal," said Fred. "We didn't expect to see you here."

"Just planning ahead for tonight," said George. "Big party to honour our own dragon slayer."

Harry looked at them coldly, and their smiles slowly faded on seeing the expressions on the three. "Like I told Ron and Hermione, I'm celebrating with my friends. But don't let my absence stop you lot from having your party."

"But we're doing it for you," Fred protested.

"To beg that bygones be bygones," George added.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not coming to your party."

The twins left in disappointment, and Harry noted Ginny's curious look. "What?" he asked.

"You're going to start on the new list of spells tonight, aren't you?"

Harry nodded. "It's funny, you know," he started. "Magic is really fun. I don't know why I haven't been more interested in learning things beyond schoolwork." He shook his head to himself recalling his father had already become an Animagus by his fourth year.

"I know what you mean," said Neville. "Since I've started researching to help you, I've found so many interesting things that can be done with magic."

Ginny snorted, making Neville blush, and Harry turned to her curiously. "We learnt the flatulence hex from the book you recommended. Neville cast it on Cormac McLaggen when he was saying something mean about you. The curse makes everyone but the victim aware of his... problem."

Harry chuckled. "How did that go?"

"Cormac's attempts to ask Katie Bell to the ball didn't go as well as he expected."

The next group to enter the Three Broomsticks was a big group of Hufflepuffs, who were celebrating with Cedric, including a few fourth years. They didn't look too pleased to see Harry in there.

"Not got many friends, do you, Potter?" Zacharias Smith smirked. "Except for squibs and dark witches."

Harry clenched his fists. He snapped, "Say what you want to say to me, Smith, leave my friends out of it."

"Or else what?" he dared.

Harry measured him contemplatively. He had just faced a Hungarian Horntail, one of the most ferocious dragons alive. A fourth year Hufflepuff didn't scare him much. Zacharias, perhaps thinking the same thing, took a step back.

"Stop it, Zacharias," said Cedric. He turned to his group. "You lot buy the butterbeer and take it back. I'll come later." He turned to Harry. "Can I join you guys for a minute?"

"You shouldn't stay alone with him," a Hufflepuff sixth year snarled at Harry. "Who knows what he'll do to you alone? One of us should stay with you as witness."

"I'll stay," Susan Bones stepped out and took a seat next to Ginny before anyone else could protest.

Cedric looked a bit lost. He shook his head at Susan when the other Hufflepuffs left. "Honestly, you don't need to stay... Harry's not going to do anything to me..."

"I know," said Susan. "You mind?" She pointed at Harry's mug of butterbeer, and before he could blink, she finished a considerable portion of it. She put the mug down and grinned at Harry's miffed expression. "See? He's harmless." She patted his messy head.

"I don't think I like you very much," Harry grumbled, pushing her hand away and moving his mug safely out of Susan's reach, and the others laughed. He felt a slight pressure in his chest when he saw Susan's smile directed at him.



"Thanks for the warning," said Cedric. "I would have been toast if I didn't know what was coming."

"Can I ask you a question?" Harry said curiously. "When you found out about the dragon... why didn't you learn the Flame-Freezing Charm? That's the most obvious thing to learn, isn't it? But neither you or any of the others used it."

Cedric considered his answer. "If I knew there was something called a Flame-Freezing Charm that does what it does, I would have thought about it. But learning an advanced charm in less than a month... it's not that easy, Harry. It's better to play to your strengths."

Harry looked away. "What if you don't have any strengths?" To his surprise, Cedric chuckled.

"You are strong in magic," said Cedric. "I've heard rumours you can cast a full Patronus in the presence of a Dementor. Even most Aurors are incapable of doing that. That's your strength; to learn useful spells quickly that the rest of us require ages to learn. Anyway, I came to thank you again and apologise how my housemates are treating you."

"Cedric's tried to stop them," said Susan. "But they don't listen."

"What I don't understand," began Ginny, "is why they're being so nasty. I can understand your housemates wanting Cedric to win, but that boy sounded like he wouldn't have minded much seeing a dragon maul Harry."

"Zacharias is a bit of a git," said Cedric. He got up. "I have to go now. I was meaning to ask Cho to the dance before heading for the party. Susan, you coming?"

"Nah," said she. "You go get her, Cedric. I'll leave with these guys."

When Cedric left, Ginny asked Susan, "Has anyone asked you yet?"

"Wayne Hopkins from Hufflepuff, Michael Corner and Terry Boot from Ravenclaw," she said, "and Blaise Zabini from Slytherin. I told them I needed time to think. You're a third year, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm going too," said Ginny. "Neville asked me."

"That's nice," said Susan. "You'll have to get your family to send you proper robes if you didn't bring them with you."

"I know," Ginny looked nervous. "I wrote to my mum and she said she'll fix something. I hope it's not too hideous. I can't afford a new set."

"My dear girl," said Susan, leaning forward as if to share a big secret. "The trick is not just the robes, but how your hair and shoes match with it."

Harry and Neville looked at each other and exchanged a silent message of wanting to be anywhere but there.

"Right," Harry said loudly, pushing his mug of butterbeer towards Susan. "Neville and I will take a look at the shops. We'll be back in a bit."

"You do that," said Ginny absently, not wanting to miss out on any important pointers from Susan. "So you're saying that I need to wear shoes that..."

Harry and Neville rushed out of the pub to preserve their sanity.

"What do you think Bagman meant that some languages cannot be comprehended when heard through air?" asked Neville.

Harry shrugged. "Beats me. But one thing's for sure, the egg reveals something in a different language."

Neville pointed to a shop ahead. "That's Dervish & Banges. They specialise in quirky magical instruments. They might have something to interpret foreign languages. Let's check that out."

"That's a good idea," said Harry.

They entered the shop, where the proprietor looked bemused to see actual customers for a change, and nearly yelled out in shock when he recognised Harry.

"Good afternoon," Harry greeted. "We wanted to know... is there any device that can help us understand languages that can't be comprehended when conducted through air?"

The man listened to their problem. "Do you know which language it is?"

Harry shook his head. "But I can make you hear it," he suggested, bringing out his egg.

"NO!" the man cried out. "Don't! If it needs a different medium, then opening it like this will be most unwise."

"Sorry," Harry apologised.

"No harm done," the man waved him off. "No harm done yet. I believe what you need to do is open your egg, if that is a kind of a recorder as I believe it to be, in different mediums such as water and earth. The best I can do for you is..." He fished out a small silver gadget. "This will indicate the language being spoken." He brought it to his lips and said clearly, "Test... one, two, three..."

The gadget had a blank surface where letters began to form – 'English'.

He tried again. "Eins, zwei, drei, vier, funf..."

The letters changed to – 'German'.

"Of course, it will write the name of the languages in English," said the man. "Six galleons, special price."

"I'll take it," said Harry. He paid for it.

"Harry, do you mind if I ask a personal question?" asked Neville, hesitatingly. "It's slightly inappropriate..." When Harry nodded, he continued. "My grandmother says your family was very well-off, and I've seen you carry plenty of money with you... is there a reason why you wear clothes that don't fit you at all? Not school robes... but your muggle clothes... and your broken glasses..."

Harry was wearing his proper robes then, but he understood what Neville meant. Other than his school robes and his fancy dress

robes purchased earlier that year, all he owned were the hand-me-downs of Dudley, who was much bigger and fatter than him.

"I guess... I've never thought much about it," Harry shrugged. "I think I need to do some shopping of my own. I'll do it next weekend. Maybe Ginny will give me a hand."

They returned to find, thankfully, that Susan and Ginny had finished talking about dress robes and shoes. Their triumph was short-lived when they heard their new topic – boys.

"Corner is a pig," Susan was saying. "He has made more girls cry in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw than any other guy in all of Hogwarts that I know of."

"So that story about him and Su Li... that's true?"

"I'm not sure what version you heard," said Susan. "But yes, he acted sweetly to her until she gave him a..." She paused when she realised Harry and Neville were back. "We'll gossip some other time, Ginny. I don't think your friends quite want us to continue."

They started heading back to Hogwarts, and Harry fell into line with Susan. He had been thinking of her while they walked and swallowed slightly before saying, "Susan, can I talk to you alone?"

Susan nodded. They walked a bit slower to allow Neville and Ginny get ahead.

"I know you have other offers but would you consider going to the ball with me?" asked Harry hopefully.

"No," said Susan.

"No?" Harry was shocked. "Just like that? No 'I need time to think'? No 'I'll get back to you'?" He sounded annoyed. "You think I'm worse than Corner, whom you called a pig?"

Susan giggled at his indignation but softened her gaze when she saw he was truly hurt by her response. "Harry, I don't think you're a bad person at all. Quite the opposite. But I spoke to Ginny earlier about dates and she said you hadn't really been thinking about any. I think you're asking me now because I'm the closest witch around

and not because you want to be with me... whereas the other guys actually wanted to be with me regardless of how little I might care about them."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to date a guy who doesn't know if he likes me," said Susan, referring to his words from earlier. "If I come with you knowing that, we'll both have an awful time... my housemates will get offended... and... do you know how to dance?"

Harry shook his head.

"And you're doing the opening dance," said Susan pointedly. "You don't really want to be with me; my housemates will get offended; and we'll look like fools in the opening dance. Can you blame me for saying no?" She looked at Harry's crestfallen face at her harsh analysis of the situation. "How about this... sort yourself out and ask me again tomorrow before dinner. I'll think again."

"In front of the other Hufflepuffs?" asked Harry.

"Yes."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "So they can laugh at me when you say no again?"

Susan didn't respond and they walked quietly back for a while. "It's up to you," she said finally. "I'll say yes to someone tomorrow night."

Harry headed straight to the library, skipping dinner. He was troubled by his conversation with Susan. She had called Michael Corner a pig and yet she hadn't outright rejected him; whereas she not only did that to him but also invited him to be a laughing stock in the great hall.

Why would she do that? He was bothered and tried to think of what he knew of Susan Bones. Truthfully, he didn't know her that well, despite being in the same year and sharing several classes. He knew her aunt worked in the Ministry of Magic and had reached very close to the top in a man's world. By all accounts, Susan was not unlike her aunt in that respect.

She had a beautiful smile, he had to concede, and a pretty face. And sometimes when she laughed, her hair...

"Potter, you're drooling."

Harry shook himself and saw Viktor Krum in front of him. "Krum," Harry greeted, wiping his mouth hastily.

"Thinking of Herm-own-ninny?" enquired Krum, with a hint of wariness.

"Herm, what?" Harry frowned. "Oh, you mean Hermione? Why would I be thinking of her?"

Krum was surprised. "You are not... does this mean you're not a couple having an argument?"

"Hermione and I?" Harry was shocked anyone could think that. "No, we've never been... like that."

"She is very upset you don't speak to her," said Krum. "I... I asked her to the Yule Ball and she said yes."

"Oh," Harry was surprised that an international Quidditch star was showing so much interest in Hermione. "That's... nice."

"You don't mind?" asked Krum. "She wants to keep it secret because she is worried how you and Ron would take it... she speaks of you a lot..."

"No," said Harry firmly. "Hermione and I are not... like that. If anything, she's more like a sister to me. She hurt me very bad earlier this year and... well... how upset is she?"

"She was crying in an abandoned toilet earlier," said Krum. "I... uh... I used a spell to find her because I wanted to ask her to the ball..."

"In the second floor?" Harry asked, feeling guilty that he had driven Hermione to that place again.

Krum nodded. He looked relieved. "So, you are fine? Hermione and me going to the ball?"

"Of course." Harry nodded. "If anything, it's Ron you need to be more worried about." Harry hesitated when Krum looked ready to leave. "Krum," he called out. "Err... Viktor... can I ask you a question... about girls?"

Krum gauged him for a moment before nodding. He sat down and waited for Harry to start speaking.

"There is a girl I... uh," said Harry. "Well, I asked her to the ball, and she said no..." Viktor looked at him sympathetically. "She said that's because she thinks I don't like her and was only asking because she was available... then she told me to sort myself out and ask her again tomorrow in front of her friends... What does she mean?"

Viktor chuckled at Harry's confusion. "Ah, my young friend... older and wiser men than you and I have tried hard to understand the female kind and failed... But I think it is clear what this girl wants. She wants you to prove that you really want her as a date. If you do, you would take the risk of public rejection."

"But what if she does say no?" said Harry. "Everyone's going to laugh at me... her house already hates me and this will make them even worse..."

"Then you have to ask yourself," said Viktor, as he stood up. "Is she the kind of girl who would do this to you? And if you think she is that kind of girl, then do you really want to go with her?"

That gave Harry more things to think of. He recalled her coming back to apologise when her housemates had insulted him. She had ended by saying, 'I guess I didn't misjudge you' when he gave her the tip for Cedric. That meant she had a high opinion of him.

He recalled meeting her after consoling Peeves. She had remarked about him being sensitive. He recalled she had left in a rush when he spoke to her in an unfriendly manner.

"But she always wears that infernal 'Potter's a Cheater' badge," Harry complained. He looked around and saw no one was there. Viktor Krum had left, leaving him alone. He rubbed his forehead, deciding there were other girls he could ask.

Like Tracey Davis, who seemed to have a crush on him. She was pretty too, and her hair was a similar shade of auburn as Susan's; although Susan had a prettier smile, and a dimple that...

Harry forced himself to stop that line of thought.

Perhaps Parvati Patil. She was one of the prettiest girls in their year and... not as pretty as Susan, of course.

"I'm doomed," Harry muttered to himself. Susan had asked him to propose in public. Why would she do that? Viktor told him to think about what kind of girl she was. Was she the kind of girl who was trying to get him to humiliate himself in public?

"No," Harry decided. "She's not like that."

Harry rubbed his forehead again, deciding to let go of that thought for the time. He had other things to worry about. Harry unfolded the new sheet of parchment that Bagman had given him.

1. Bubblehead Charm... allows one to breathe underwater
2. Impedimenta... slows enemies
3. Diffindo... cuts things as if with a dagger
4. Point Me... Point Me, by itself, will point to the north. Point me Harry Potter, will show me the direction where Harry Potter is

The first charm revealed to Harry very obviously that the next task was going to be underwater. Point me told him that he had to search for someone or something.

He took notes, once again, of the incantations and wand movements and any relevant theory that he needed to know. But the easiest spell to learn amongst them was Diffindo. The only problem was that Harry didn't have any target to practice it on in the library. So when Madam Pince announced the hour before curfew, he decided to leave.

He walked back to Gryffindor common room, and was surprised when he saw everyone still awake and waiting. The crates of butterbeer the twins had bought were still unopened.



"We waited," said Fred.

"... hoping that you'd forgive us," said George.

Harry frowned. Not everyone was there; but everyone he had once thought a friend and had abandoned him after the Goblet of Fire chose him was present. The Quidditch team, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and several others.

"You know what," Harry said slowly. "I could understand Hufflepuff... I completely understand Slytherin... and maybe Ravenclaw; they had no reason to support me over someone older and more experienced, so I could understand them... but you lot, you were supposed to be my friends." He looked directly at Ron and Hermione. "You were supposed to stand beside me no matter what happened. But you didn't. Guess it shows why the Sorting Hat didn't put you in Hufflepuff."

There was complete silence.

"We're sorry," said Katie Bell miserably. She and Harry had been close, having joined the Gryffindor Quidditch team in the same year and being the youngest in the team. "How can we make it up to you?"

"You can't," said Harry simply. "I guess I do forgive you all, and we can be friends again, but how do you expect me to forget this?" He saw Ginny and Neville look at him. "Don't expect me to be your best mate ever, all of you other than Ginny and Neville," he looked directly at Ron as he spoke and Ron didn't meet his eyes, "and we might still be friends." He looked around and felt uncomfortable being stared at. "Um... can I have a butterbeer?"

"You silly boy," Ginny grabbed him in a hug, surprising him.

"I... I want to talk to you later," Harry whispered in her ear. But he didn't get that chance for quite a while as several others – including most of the old Quidditch team, his friends and a few others insisted on spending a few minutes with him alone saying how sorry they were and how they would never repeat it again.

But Harry realised there was someone who hadn't spoken to him all night. Someone who hadn't even looked at him. He walked to her.

"Hermione," Harry said quietly. Hermione jumped when he addressed her. She looked terrible. "Come here." He opened his arms, and Hermione walked into his embrace.

"I... Harry..." she seemed unable to form words. "P-Please..."

"I forgive you," he said softly. "Don't hurt me again."

"I won't!" she promised, holding him tightly. "Viktor told me what you said to him... that you think of me as a sister... I... I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry..."

Harry held her quietly for a few minutes and then Hermione said she was feeling tired and left to go to bed. He then scanned the room, and ignoring Ron, who was hoping to be the next person he went to, Harry walked towards Ginny and nudged her.

"Oh, right," Ginny said. "You wanted to talk?"

"In private," said Harry. They walked to a quiet corner, where they wouldn't be overheard. "There are two things. First, what does Susan think of me?"

Ginny was slightly startled at his question.

"I am going to ask her out to the ball tomorrow," he clarified.

A strange expression flashed through Ginny's face, showing disappointment and excitement simultaneously. "She... she thinks you dislike her, but I am very sure that she herself has a crush on you."

Harry was surprised. "Why do you say that?" he asked eagerly.

Ginny chuckled. "The way she was looking at you in Hogsmeade. And also, when we were talking about boys, she briefly hinted that she thinks you're one of the nicest boys in her year."

Harry blushed at her words, feeling pleased to hear that. "So, you think I should ask her?"

Ginny paused. The look of disappointment was back on. But she forced herself to say, "Yes, you should."

"Thanks," Harry looked relieved.

"What's the second thing?" Ginny tried to smile but it came rather strained.

"You," said Harry quietly. "Earlier, Zacharias Smith called you a 'dark witch'. What was that about?"

Ginny lowered her gaze but didn't say anything for a while.

"Ginny, look at me," Harry told her. "Is this because of the Chamber of Secrets?"

Ginny nodded miserably.

Harry felt ashamed of himself, realising how in his previous year the three of them – Hermione, Ron and he – had ignored Ginny once again, choosing to have adventures surrounding the prisoner of Azkaban.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and his tone made Ginny look up in shock. "I should have... I don't deserve your friendship."

"Don't be silly," Ginny hit his arm playfully. "Anyone with a Firebolt thoroughly deserves my friendship." Harry grinned. "Yes, that was a hint."

Harry leaned back with a pleasant smirk. "You can ride my broom anytime you want, Miss Weasley." He enjoyed seeing her face become redder than a tomato.

Notes: Please review with feedback.

## Chapter 2

"So, what do you think?"

Harry looked at Susan intently, hoping that the dread and terror inside him wasn't as apparent in his face. He had marched with determination to the Hufflepuff table when Susan arrived, and her friends had instantly become wary. But Harry had ignored the jibes thrown at him by Zacharias Smith and Wayne Hopkins and walked straight to Susan.

"I... uh..." Susan looked at a loss. Despite having been the one who suggested he ask her at dinner, she was blushing and didn't look like she expected him to actually do it.

"I promise I'll do everything I can to make the evening fun for you," Harry urged desperately. "I'm taking extra dance lessons with Professor McGonagall and I'll try not to embarrass you... I really want to have you as my date and I..."

"Go away, Potter," Wayne Hopkins snarled at him. "You can't have her."

Harry ignored him and kept looking at Susan, who had turned a deep shade of crimson. "Will you at least consider?"

Susan swallowed. "No..."

Harry felt his stomach drop. He could hear the jeers from the others nearby and a look of dejection crossed his face.

"I mean, I don't have to consider," Susan continued in a rush, when she saw his pained expression. "I'll go with you."

Harry froze.

Susan smiled at him. "Thanks for asking me, Harry," she said, ignoring the shocked expressions her housemates were giving her. "I'd love to be your date." She turned to her right. "And stop making that face at me, Justin, otherwise I won't help you with asking you-know-what to you-know-who before the you-know-when."

Justin Finch-Fletchley turned a sheepish gaze away from Susan and returned to his food.

"And Ernie, if you still want me to read through your Potions essay, stop glaring at me and focus on that potato on your fork that just missed your mouth," Susan continued. She blatantly ignored the other boys who were looking at her with betrayal. Her friend Hannah winked at her, Justin and Ernie shrugged. She then turned to Harry again. "I guess my friends are okay with this too."

"Great," Harry was suddenly unsure if asking Susan was such a good idea, on seeing the swiftness with which she diffused the situation. But then she smiled at him, and he relaxed. "I uh... should go back to my table..."

"Sit with me," Susan urged, making space between her and Justin. "For a change, sit with me."

Harry was not so sure about that. He was still receiving glares from Zacharias Smith, Wayne Hopkins and nearly half the table. But Susan was looking at him hopefully and he decided sitting with her was worth it.

"You said you're taking extra lessons with McGonagall," Justin suddenly blurted out. "Do you think she'll give me some as well?"

Harry hesitated. He had convinced McGonagall because he would be opening the dance but after what Susan had told him earlier about Hufflepuffs not appreciating McGonagall's favouritism towards Gryffindors, he couldn't say that to Justin. The Hufflepuffs would think this was yet another display of favouritism.

"I think she wanted people to let her know of extra lessons in advance so she could make a schedule," Harry managed to find an excuse which wasn't entirely false. "But if you want, come to the trophy room after dinner tomorrow. That's when she teaches me. I'll try to convince her to give some time to you as well."

Justin looked surprised at his offer. "Thanks," he muttered.

Harry turned to Susan, who looked pleased at Justin's efforts as well as his response.

"You like fish?" Susan asked, looking at Harry's plate.

Harry shrugged, nibbling a bit of his dinner. "Actually, I just don't like pork," he said, referring to the other dinner option. "What about you?"

"I love fish," said Susan. "I always have it if it's on the menu. Is there a reason for your strong dislike of pork?"

"Uh... honestly, it reminds me of my cousin," said Harry, and hastily explained when Susan chuckled uncertainly at what she thought might have been a joke she didn't get. "When Hagrid came to introduce me to the magical world, my relatives were being nasty and he gave my cousin a pig's tail."

"Really?" Susan was surprised.

"It was fantastic," admitted Harry. "Dudley used to bully me as a kid."

Susan's smile slowly faded.

"Of course, now he can't stay in the same room with me without clutching his behind fearfully," continued Harry, not sure why he was rambling on and on about such pointless things. "What about you? How was your childhood?"

"I grew up with my aunt," said Susan, and it wasn't necessary to say much more. Many students in their age group were orphans, a result of Voldemort's insurgency. "She works in the Ministry and is a busy woman. But we have loads of fun when she's at home."

"That sounds nice," said Harry. "What does she do in the Ministry?"

Susan blushed slightly. "She's Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Oh," Harry was surprised. Ludo Bagman and Arthur Weasley had explained a bit of the Ministry of Magic's organisation at Hermione's questioning during the Quidditch World Cup. "Is her name Amelia? Mr Bagman mentioned her once."

"Yeah," said Susan. "Amelia Susan Bones. I didn't realise you knew Ludo Bagman well."

"Not very well," said Harry. "I met him during the Quidditch World Cup."

"I heard about that," said Susan. "The Daily Prophet wrote an article about you being present in Fudge's box. That has boosted his popularity for next year's elections."

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh dear, you didn't know?" Susan looked like she didn't want to continue on the topic. "Your support for Cornelius Fudge was a big political victory for him." She hesitated, looking instantly weary and troubled. "I'd rather not talk of politics, if it's all the same with you."

Harry shrugged, but he vowed to find out more about it privately. Could it be that Mr Weasley had used him for his own political means? He wanted to believe that wasn't true, but how else would the Weasleys be able to afford the best tickets – ten of them – for the most important wizarding event in Britain that year.

"It was nice talking to you," Harry stood up when dinner was over. "I'm really looking forward to the Ball." He hesitated. "Do you want to meet up sometime before that?"

"I'd like that," said Susan, with a smile. "This Saturday is a Hogsmeade weekend. How about then?"

Harry looked slightly disappointed. "Ginny's helping me shop for clothes, and then we are meeting Neville for a drink." He brightened up a bit. "But join us in the Three Broomsticks. It will be like that impromptu Hogsmeade visit, only longer."

"That sounds nice," she agreed. "I'll see you later."

The next day Harry was back in the library and looking at the list of spells he needed to learn for the Second Task. It was easier for him to concentrate now that Susan had agreed to go with him.

"Point me Susan," he whirled his wand on his table. It rotated around its centre for half a minute before pointing in a direction. Harry grinned when he raised his head and saw Susan wave at him

from the table she was sitting with Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbott.

He was quite surprised by how Susan's closest friends were making great efforts at being civil with him, and he was somewhat touched by that, even though he wasn't ready to be good friends with them anytime soon.

"She's such an incredible girl," Harry muttered to Neville.

Neville started slightly and grinned back at Harry. "I don't see why you must learn the Bubblehead Charm," said Neville. "Gillyweed is equally effective."

"Yes," agreed Harry, "but the Bubblehead has a lot of other practical uses which may come handy later; like when you want to breathe in a place that stinks very bad, or there's low oxygen."

Neville thought about it. "Harry," he said quietly, looking over his shoulder. "Hermione just entered the library. She looks angry."

Harry turned his head and saw Hermione stomp to a bookshelf and grab books at random before scanning the library for a free table. Her eyes locked with Harry's and her expression softened. Harry waved at her, and Hermione hopefully walked towards them.

"Can I sit with you two?" she asked. "I promise I won't disturb you."

In response, Harry pushed the chair next to him for her to sit. "You can help if you want to." He was rewarded by a relieved smile from Hermione.

"Have you figured out the clue?" she looked impressed when she saw a file and quickly browsed through it to see sheets with information about the Tournament, a sheet with a rhyme labelled 'Second Task - Clue' and lists of spells. "Wow. You're being very organised about this."

"Learnt it from the best," Harry smiled at her, making her flush in pleasure. "The second task is this: I will have to go underwater in the lake to search for a treasure taken from me by the merfolk."

"Hmm." Hermione nibbled the end of her quill.



"I'm thinking of a Bubblehead Charm," said Harry and pushed a book in front of her with description of the charm. "The point me spell to help in direction. A cutting curse in case of seaweeds and other traps. The Impedimenta jinx to slow any hostile water creatures. Any suggestions?"

"Bluebells flames."

Harry turned to her. "The one you used to get rid of the Devil's Snare in our first year?"

Hermione nodded. "They do not burn things like ordinary fire and provide heat and light," said Hermione. "If you conjure some before going underwater, it will keep you warm and provide light."

"That's practical," agreed Neville.

"And I've known how to cast it since my first year," said Hermione. "I can teach it to you."

They spent the rest of the evening learning the Bluebells flames. Madam Pince appeared once on seeing them practice magic but after getting a promise not to perform anything but the Bluebells and the point me spell, she acquiesced. Those two spells couldn't damage any books.

"Are you guys going to Hogsmeade tomorrow?" Hermione asked suddenly. "I don't have any plans yet."

Harry hesitated. "Ginny, Neville, Susan and I have plans for tomorrow," he said apologetically.

"Oh," Hermione was disappointed.

"What about Ron?" asked Harry.

"We had a fight," Hermione shrugged. "Never mind. I'll try to find more spells that will be useful for you. There's not much I want to do in the village anyway."

Harry felt slightly guilty and he exchanged a glance with Neville, who looked troubled as well. But neither of them wanted to change plans from their double date.

When it was approaching curfew, Harry motioned for Neville and Hermione to go ahead. He twirled his wand. "Point me Viktor Krum." He followed in the direction shown, and repeated the spell a few times to find Viktor running around the lake.

"Viktor," Harry called out, and the athlete joined him. He was sweating despite it being the middle of January in Scotland. "Do you run every day?"

"As often as I can find time," Viktor nodded. "Is there something you need?"

"Tomorrow," Harry began. "It's Hogsmeade weekend and everyone goes on dates from Hogwarts. But nobody has asked Hermione." He looked at Viktor pointedly. "She's planning to stay in the library and read."

"That's good," said Viktor. "I have to do some reading too."

Harry was relieved.

"I saw you get your girl a few nights ago," said Viktor. "Well done, my young friend."

"Thanks for your advice." Harry grinned. "You were spot on. She's not the kind of girl who'd have told me to ask her just to humiliate me in public." He hesitated. "This is the first time I'm taking a girl out... I'm nervous..."

Viktor chuckled again. "Everyone is. On the night itself, make sure your hair is settled, wear a nice set of robes, don't be scared of dancing, and if things go well, kiss her at the end. Then ask her out again a couple of days later."

Harry furiously tried to memorize all that. "Shall I get her flowers?"

Viktor paused. "That depends on the girl. Some girls really like it, others get freaked out." He looked contemplatively at Harry. "I think you may pull it off. Don't get red roses, definitely. No bouquets."

"Then what?"

"Take a single white rose, or better still, hand-picked wildflowers as a corsage," said Viktor. "That will do."

Harry nodded. There were wildflowers in the forbidden forest close to Hagrid's cottage. He could make a corsage using those wildflowers. "Is there anything else I should keep in mind?"

Viktor looked at him. "If she wants to dance with other male friends, don't make a fuss," he said. "But gently step back in after she's had two-three dances with the same boy or fifteen minutes away from you; you don't want her to get too comfortable without you. During this time, dance with other female friends of yours. Ask her if she is thirsty or tired after the first half an hour but not again until she actually looks so. Keep your eyes on her face, not lower than that, and your hands at appropriate places."

"I should have brought a notepad," Harry muttered, and Viktor chuckled.

"These are things you learn from experience," said the older boy.

"You'll take good care of Hermione, won't you?" asked Harry.

"You bet," promised Viktor. "She's a gem, not like those simpering fools that keep following me like lost puppies."

"I know what you mean," Harry sighed.

"Fame has its price," agreed Viktor. "But it has its benefits as well. Don't forget that. I'll see you around, Potter. Good luck."

Saturday was a surprisingly bright and sunny day and Harry eagerly allowed Ginny to drag him from counter to counter of the four clothing stores in Hogsmeade.

"I don't want to try another set," Harry grumbled.

"This might be a better fit!" Ginny protested, grabbing the jeans he had just tried and shoving another pair into his arms. "Go!" she pointed to the trial room. She glared at him until he gave up and did

as she told. When he came out, Ginny shook her head. "The previous one was better. Okay, now we know what fits you."

"Great."

"We'll take two pairs of jeans," said Ginny. "The dark blue straight-fits and the dark grey boot-cuts."

"That will be eleven galleons," said the shopkeeper, and Harry glumly was about to pay the lady, but Ginny slapped his hand back.

"Madam Twilfit!" Ginny exclaimed. "Eleven galleons for two jeans! During your advertised winter sale! This is daylight robbery! Why, I would get a better price in Jeeves and Wizards in Diagon Alley!"

"But you're not in Diagon Alley, child," said the lady, but she looked slightly embarrassed at Ginny's outburst. "I'd forgotten about that sale... let's see... seven galleons should do it."

"That's better," Ginny waited for Harry to pay for it.

"You're a shopping-demon," Harry muttered.

Ginny looked at him in surprise. "Why, thank you, Harry. That's so kind of you." She looked at her list. "Okay, we've got five t-shirts, three shirts and two jeans. Next on the list is a jacket. You won't get many nice jackets in Hogsmeade, not worth the money at least... how about jumpers and scarves instead?"

"I've got the jumpers Mrs Weasley sent last three Christmases," said Harry.

Ginny looked slightly touched by his statement but she tutted. "If I remember correctly, you were about this high," she pointed to her knees, "when you were a first year."

"Why, you little..."

"So," Ginny interrupted, moving safely away from Harry's reach, "jumpers, it is."

After another gruelling hour of shopping, Ginny finally relented and they carried the many bags towards Three Broomsticks.

"What's in that green bag?" asked Ginny, not recalling when that was purchased. "It looks too big to be anything we bought."

Harry grinned at her mischievously.

"No, you didn't!" Ginny looked at him furiously. "I told you not to!"

Harry shrugged. "It's my Christmas present for someone I care about. I don't think you get a say in what I buy for my friends."

Ginny tried to maintain her anger but her lips twitched. "You're infuriating, Harry. How did you even manage to buy it without my finding out?"

"I sneaked back to the other shop when I said I was going to the other side to look at shoes," said Harry, handing her the green bag. "You'll look great in this dress. Neville won't know what hit him."

Ginny's smile faltered somewhat. But she took the bag from him quietly. "Thanks," she whispered before they stepped into the pub.

Susan was already there, but she hadn't come alone. Justin and Hannah had come with her. "I hope you don't mind I invited some of my friends too," she said.

Harry didn't reply as he shook his head. He had hoped for an outing with just the four of them, and that's why he hadn't invited Hermione. That made him slightly annoyed with Susan, but only until she flashed a grateful smile at him.

"How's the preparation for the second task?" asked Susan.

Harry nodded. "I deciphered the clue and am working on spells that will help me."

"What's the task?" Justin leaned forward with interest.

Harry hesitated. He had told Cedric of the dragons because that was fair, but there was absolutely no reason for him to divulge any more information, not when Harry wanted to win the Tournament and prove to himself that he was better than the others.

"Oh, stop it, Justin," Susan came to his rescue. "Harry and I are going to the Ball doesn't change the fact that I'm still rooting for a Hufflepuff victory." She looked seriously at Harry. "Anything you tell me will be relayed to Cedric, so no one can accuse me of not showing house loyalty."

Harry grinned at her. He waved at Neville who joined them at that point. Neville, too, looked at the other Hufflepuffs and was slightly peeved.

"How was the shopping, guys?" he asked Harry and Ginny as he sat down.

Harry grinned and pointed at the large number of bags surrounding his feet.

"Wow," said Neville. "You emptied all of Hogsmeade, did you?"

"Ginny sure wouldn't have minded me doing that," said Harry darkly.

Ginny giggled. "You should have seen his face when I made him try a different pair of jeans for the seventh time," she leaned towards Susan. "I've never seen someone sulk like that."

Susan looked at Ginny contemplatively. "You were just doing it for fun, weren't you?"

"Of course," said Ginny.

All three girls laughed, completely ignoring Harry's disgruntled and indignant face. Neville shared a commiserating look with Harry while Justin was looking longingly at a table where Ernie MacMillan and Megan Jones were sitting.

"I heard your brother ask Fleur Delacour to the Ball yesterday," said Hannah to Ginny, making the redhead witch grimace. "Yeah, that was painful to watch."

"That's odd," said Justin, suddenly moving on to their conversation. "I thought Weasley would come with Granger."

"No, she's got another date," said Harry, but he refused to divulge any more than that, and Ginny appeared to be the only other person who knew the identity of Hermione's date.

The rest of the afternoon passed by swiftly and Harry was disappointed when it was time for them to head back. He dropped into line with Susan, and summoning all his courage, slipped his fingers into her hand. Susan stiffened slightly at the contact but she fastened her fingers around his and smiled at him.

"What made you decide?" asked Susan in a low volume. "To ask me and risk my humiliating you."

"You won't believe it," said Harry. "I asked Viktor Krum when I couldn't understand what you wanted to achieve. He told me to think if you were the kind of person who would do something like that to me."

"Oh," Susan flushed. For a moment, a strange expression passed through her face, but then she replied with mock-sharpness, "I suppose I ought to be glad you don't have such a low opinion of me, Harry Potter."

Harry turned a little red.

"Just kidding," Susan chuckled. "You're fun to annoy."

Harry tightened his grip on her hand, and she took a deep breath, and they walked in silence.

The morning of the Yule Ball saw Harry hunt for flowers at the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid had sent Fang to keep an eye on Harry but he wasn't sure what the cowardly hound was capable of doing should some real danger arise. At least, this time Harry was more prepared than all his previous adventures in the forest. He knew two different shields, a cutting curse and the impedimenta-hex. Moreover, he was getting more adept at conjuring birds, clones of himself, and bluebells flames to distract any potential beast that sought to hurt him.

But fortunately nothing happened.

A short while later he was back in his dormitory and scouring through the pages of a book to find charms that might make a makeshift corsage. Neville was with him, and between the two of them, they had ruined half the flowers he had brought.

"Okay," said Harry. "I think I've finally got it." He looked glumly at the flowers that still remained. "I think you should take the blue ones. They'll look nice on Ginny."

"You sure?" Neville was surprised. "They're the prettiest flowers of the lot."

Harry nodded. "She'll be happy. But don't ruin the flowers," he warned Neville, as he started making a corsage as well. He picked up three different kinds of white flowers and arranged them close to each other with a few leaves behind them. Then he cast the charms to bind them with ribbons to make a corsage.

"Wow," said Neville when Harry was done. "That looks so much better than your first attempt."

"Thanks," said Harry. He raised his head and saw Dean, Seamus and Ron enter the dorm and look at the two of them in confusion.

"What are you doing?" asked Dean. He looked at the flowers and groaned. "You idiots. Now Lisa will be annoyed that I didn't make any for her."

"Eh," Seamus frowned. "What about Lavender? She'll be furious." He looked sympathetically at Ron. "But not as furious as Parvati. She dropped many hints that she was expecting flowers."

"Really?" Ron was surprised to hear that. He looked enviously at the corsage in Harry's hand, and then some of his earlier attempts which weren't as good but still better than nothing. "Harry, can I take one of those you're not using?" He asked tentatively. His old friendship with Harry was all but gone. But they had started becoming cordial again.

"Eh... Sure," Harry shrugged. He picked one up and tossed it to Ron.



"Harry, mate," Seamus began. Harry tossed one to him too, and then to Dean. "Thanks... You should get ready. There's only another hour left."

Most of the remaining hour was spent by Harry trying to settle his hair, and finally he gave up, and on Dean's advice, took Dean's hair wax and went for an all-out messy look.

"No, that doesn't look right," Dean shook his head. "Wait a moment." He fished a magazine out of his trunk. It was Witch Weekly's special edition of men's hairstyles. Dean ignored the catcalls from Seamus and turned to a page. "This one. Try to do this. It'll look good on you."

Harry agreed with Dean's assessment on seeing the style. The model on whom it was displayed had a similar facial structure to him and was wearing glasses as well. He spent some time emulating the style and when he was done, Dean whistled.

"Perfect," said Neville. "Susan will love it."

Harry grinned at his dorm mates gratefully. They were finally gelling together as a team, rather than just him and Ron doing things and ignoring the rest. The only low point was when Ron came out in his dress robes, which looked like something out of the fifteenth century.

"Don't worry, Ron," Neville said reassuringly. "Parvati's wearing a traditional Indian dress. You can say you chose this deliberately so it'll look like the two of you worked out a traditional and cultured theme."

"She'll buy that?" asked Ron uncertainly.

"It's Parvati," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, right," said Ron, in considerably better spirits.

Harry left them when Neville was ready and the two of them walked to their common room. Ginny was already there, and she whistled in appreciation when her two closest friends emerged.

"You boys look very fine," she said appreciatively, and made great efforts to not keep her eyes fixed on Harry. "Oh... is that for me?"

she asked in a shrill voice when Neville attached the blue corsage to her dress. She was speechless.

"You look nice, Ginny," said Neville shyly, as he kissed each of Ginny's cheek.

"You look wonderful, Ginny," Harry stated emphatically, stepping forward to kiss Ginny's cheeks as well.

"Watch it, she's my date tonight," Neville retorted in good humour.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, letting go of Ginny. "But she's still one of my dearest friends."

Ginny swallowed, and took a few deep breaths. "Wow. Is that for Susan? She'll love it. I didn't know... I didn't expect you boys to be so thoughtful..." She suddenly grinned. "Wait till you see Hermione. She's coming down anytime now and she's looking out of this world."

"I uh... I can't wait too long," said Harry. "I am escorting Susan from the Hufflepuff common room." He paused when he saw Hermione step down from the stairs and grin at their group. "Guys," said Harry curiously, when Hermione joined them. "Can someone tell me who got rid of our Hermione and brought this smokin' hottie in her place?"

Hermione blushed.

"Come here," Harry opened his arms and Hermione hugged him. "Viktor's a lucky fellow." He let go of her. "Susan will be waiting for me. I'll see you lot in the hall."

"Shall we come with you?" asked Neville curiously.

"Nah," said Harry. "Go with Hermione to where she's meeting Viktor Krum."

Hermione muttered something.

"What's that?" asked Ginny, shooting her head towards the brunette. "The library?"

"Yes," said Hermione.

The others tried hard not to laugh but Harry couldn't hold back a chuckle. "Save a dance for me, both of you," he said, and left, feeling happy with how the day had gone so far.

The Hufflepuff common room was located near the basement and wasn't too far from the great hall. He reached there without any incident, other than waving at a few couples, who looked as happy as him. It was hard for him to maintain his coldness towards those who had scorned him since the Goblet of Fire had picked him, with all the festive cheer and goodwill around. Most surprising was his encounter with Draco Malfoy and Tracey Davis.

"Coming alone, Potter? Couldn't find a date?" Draco shot at him.

"Why, are you jealous you're not, Malfoy?" shot back Harry, pretending to look appraisingly at Tracey, as if Draco would have done better to come alone. He instantly regretted his sharp words when the blonde witch looked a little hurt, but to his surprise, Draco Malfoy took no offence at his words.

"The old Harry Potter would have reached for his wand at the slightest hint of banter," said Draco.

"The old Draco Malfoy would have said something disparaging about my friends," Harry replied.

"Ah, and now you don't have any friends," said Draco, as if that explained everything.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, just go to the hall, and don't get lost on the way."

"I would have thought you'd be hoping we do get lost," Draco said, as he took Tracey's arm.

"Well, then how would I be able to steal Tracey away from you tonight?" Harry shot back at their backs. It was when he heard both their lingering laughs that Harry wondered how much of his enmity with Draco Malfoy was entirely his own fault.

After all, Draco had twice attempted friendship with him. Once in Madam Malkin's, where Harry ignored Draco haughtily, and the second occasion when Draco tried to shake hands with him in the Hogwarts Express. Harry grimaced at how mean he was; objectively, Draco hadn't made the best first impression, but Harry had exacerbated it. Draco wasn't the nicest persons around, but there was no reason to be as disparaging as he had been.

They weren't a bad sort, most Slytherins, despite having their flaws. Harry was realising that, having seen the poor qualities he had believed limited to Slytherin house being reflected in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff as well. They were all alike – students, eleven year olds, and as surely as Gryffindor could breed rotten individuals like Wormtail, so could Slytherin breed decent persons.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

Harry groaned when he saw the last person he wanted to see at that moment emerge from the painting that was most likely the path to the Hufflepuff common room.

"That's none of your business, Zacharias," said Harry. He tried to recall the name of the girl he was with but failed. She wasn't in their year.

"I know what you've done to Susan," Zacharias snapped. "Love potions, weren't it? I tell you, Potter, you will regret messing with Hufflepuffs and..."

"That's enough, Zacharias," Cedric Diggory walked out. He looked annoyed with his housemate. "Just go to the ball."

Zacharias looked from Harry to Cedric in confusion but decided to leave.

"Harry," Cedric nodded. "I'm sure Susan will approve of what you've done to your hair."

Harry grinned. "I hope so too," he said. "Took me a while."

"Well, I'd better head off and pick Cho from her common room," said Cedric. He hesitated before leaving. "My father will be here tonight. If he... says something..."

Harry shrugged. "Don't worry," he said. "I know he's proud of you and won't be too pleased with me. But why is he here?"

Cedric shrugged. "Mr Crouch has been missing. So until they replace him, my father and Director Bones are taking over the tournament. Fudge wanted to come as well, but he's busy with his election campaign for next year."

"Director Bones," Harry froze. "Susan's aunt will be here tonight?"

Cedric's lips twitched. "I believe so, yes. Don't worry, Harry, she's all right... except when she sends people off to Azkaban."

"Gee, thanks, Cedric," Harry muttered. "That makes me feel so relieved."

He took a deep breath and readied himself when he saw Susan emerge next. His jaws dropped when he saw her. Her auburn hair was raised in a bun with strands falling around her face, strands that Harry wanted to reach forward to and feel in his fingers. There was minimum makeup on her face, just enough to make her shine all the more. Her dress was a dark forest green colour, that perfectly matched her hair and she stepped closer to Harry, to kiss his cheek.

"Thank you for the compliment, Harry," Susan said sarcastically after parting from him.

"I uh..." Harry swallowed. "I uh... I mean... I uh..."

Susan chuckled. Her eyes widened when she saw the corsage in his hands. "Is that... for me?"

Harry blinked and looked at the white wildflowers he had wound in a wrist band with ribbons with surprise. Without saying a word, he reached for her hand and put it on her.

"I uh..." Harry observed her.

"I think we've covered that already," Susan said.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "This isn't fair. I was very smooth with Ginny and Hermione... I was performing fantastically..."

Susan chuckled. She leaned closer and put her arms around his neck. "I think I like seeing you as a gibbering wreck in front of me."

"You do, do you?" Harry muttered, wrapping his arms around her. She trembled lightly in his grasp. He was trying to think of a witty repartee but the moment was lost and he didn't mind it too much, just holding her.

"Your aunty will be in the high table tonight." Harry was holding her hand as they walked to the great hall.

Susan stiffened. She looked at Harry uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Is there a problem?"

Susan shook her head immediately. "No, not a problem. It's just that, I didn't tell her I was going out as Harry Potter's date." She smiled at him but it was slightly strained. "She'll be surprised."

"As long as she doesn't send me to Azkaban," Harry muttered, making Susan laugh. Once again, Harry calmed down on hearing that melodic sound. He smiled back at her.

Harry frowned at the slight inflection in her tone as she spoke and knew that she was hiding something but decided against pursuing it. There was a festive night ahead of them.

"Wow, Hermione's looking amazing," said Susan when they entered the hall. "And oh my god, is that little Ginny?"

"Not so little, is she?" Harry chuckled.

"What's that ridiculous thing your friend Ron Weasley is wearing?" asked Susan.

Harry shrugged. "Parvati doesn't seem to mind it too much." He caught sight of Ludo Bagman in bright purple robes with large yellow stars. "Let's find our seats." They walked to the top table.

"Ah, Harry, what a pleasure," Bagman called out jovially. "Is that... Miss Bones?"

"Good evening, Mr Bagman," Susan called out politely. "It's nice to see you again."

"The pleasure is all mine," said Bagman. For some reason he looked delighted to see Susan. "Here's your seat, I believe, the two of you are between me and Krum."

Harry didn't mind that at all. In fact, he felt quite secure sitting between Bagman and Krum; both had become mentors to him in different ways. Bagman, for the Tournament. Krum, for all matters related to girls.

Bagman whispered to Harry, "This is important. If Amos says something attacking, don't let it get to you. Maintain your dignity. There are reporters all around."

Sure enough, soon Amos Diggory and Amelia Bones also arrived.

"Susan, what a surprise!" Amelia approached them. "Mr Potter."

Harry got up and shook hands with her. "It's Harry, ma'am."

"Surely, this doesn't change anything, Amelia," Amos Diggory said sharply from behind her. "We are still carrying out our enquiry on how an underage wizard hoodwinked the Goblet of Fire."

For a brief moment Harry felt the urge to defend himself. He was sure something showed in his face because everyone around him was waiting for his response. But Bagman's warning rang in his ears and he saw Rita Skeeter and a couple of other reporters scribbling away in different areas of the hall.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Mr Diggory," said Harry. "I'd like to know who entered my name as well."

"Now, look here," Diggory turned to him with a deep frown. "Enough of this nonsense. How did you..."

"Amos," Bagman interjected. "Not during the Ball, and I believe Director Bones is in agreement with me."

Crisis was averted for the time being and Harry turned to Susan in relief, but he saw her looking unhappily at the empty glass in front of her.

"Hey," Harry whispered. "Is something wrong?" At his words, Susan raised her head and smiled at him. She shook her head. "I'm sorry," said Harry. "You must be annoyed with all the politics that comes around me. I really don't like any of it."

Susan remained silent for a few moments. "It's okay, Harry. It's not your fault."

"So what do you think, Mr Potter?" Diggory directed the conversation between the Ministry officials and Dumbledore to him. "You made a strong statement in support of Fudge this summer. Does that mean he has your support for the coming elections?"

Harry froze. He hadn't expected such a pointed question being thrown at him. Instinctively, his eyes fell on Hermione for support.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Diggory, I don't understand something," Hermione spoke out, sounding apologetic for her interruption. "Don't you have to be of age to vote in the magical world?"

"What a silly question," said Diggory. "Of course, you do."

Harry caught on. "I think what Hermione's getting at is why should my support count for anything. I'm an underage student in Hogwarts with absolutely no interest in politics."

Diggory looked slightly flabbergasted. "Well, whether you like it or not, you did send Fudge's rating higher than before."

Bagman chuckled. "You shouldn't read too much political movement in that, Amos. The boy merely wanted to watch Quidditch with his friends, and perhaps, get an eyeful of a few veela as well."

"What's happened to Mr Crouch?" Harry suddenly asked before the topic could be continued.

"He's missing," said Bagman. "Odd, if you ask me. Don't recall ol' Barty ever missing work before this."



"I know for a fact he's only missed work four days in the last thirty years," said Amelia. "And those were during... a troubled time for his family."

Harry leaned closer to Amelia Bones, suddenly realising an opportunity that was right in front of him. "Wasn't Mr Crouch the one who sent people to Azkaban without trials?"

Amelia turned rigid and shot her head towards Harry sharply. "What did you say?"

"Err..." Harry felt conscious of being in the spotlight. "Sirius Black. I was doing some digging up last year after finding out Black betrayed my parents. There was no trial, Director Bones. Crouch sent Sirius Black to Azkaban straight from the streets."

"From the crime scene, you mean," said Amos Diggory. "I was there as a Ministry Obliviator, same as Cornelius Fudge. There was no doubt at all... not a doubt..."

"That shouldn't make a difference," Hermione said vigorously. "Everyone has a right to fair trial and face his accuser. Or they should, as they do in the muggle world."

"The rules of natural justice originated in Merlin's time and are the same in both magical and muggle communities, Miss Granger," said Albus Dumbledore. He sounded thoroughly amused by the proceedings.

"Indeed." Amelia Bones looked troubled.

"Then why didn't Sirius Black receive a trial," said Harry. "Important information could have been discovered... like other Death Eaters' names... Black's motives for betraying my parents... or maybe... maybe, his innocence."

"Preposterous!"

Harry ignored Amos Diggory, and kept looking at Amelia Bones. But before she could respond to his indirect accusation of the Ministry throwing innocent people in Azkaban, Dumbledore spoke out, clearly and solemnly, "Pork chops."

Harry felt like tearing his hair out in frustration when Amelia hastily turned to make her own order.

"Sea bass," said Susan, next to Harry.

"Sea bass," Harry repeated. He hadn't seen the menu yet but decided to trust Susan's choice.

"That was fun," Susan whispered to him. "I haven't seen Aunt Amelia put in such a tight spot before. But I'm glad Dumbledore interrupted before it became too heated."

Harry wanted to argue against that point. He'd rather the argument had become more heated if it secured Sirius his freedom. But then he checked himself. Sirius was free at the moment, and there was no point ruining everybody's night because of this. More importantly, he had made his point with dignity.

No, Harry realised when he saw Rita Skeeter's gleaming eyes as she scribbled furiously. More importantly, he had conveyed his point in public before the press. Quashing every fibre inside him which screamed 'No', Harry raised his goblet when Rita Skeeter's eyes met his and winked. When the reporter blushed, Harry knew he had sown the seeds for another powerful ally.

Soon it was time to dance. Harry, despite his extra lessons, was nervous. He took Susan's hand and led her to the dance floor. Fleur and her date, a Ravenclaw boy called Roger Davies, were already there, waiting impatiently for the other Champions. Viktor nodded at Harry reassuringly as he came with Hermione, and Cedric and Cho also appeared. Cedric didn't meet Harry's eyes, either embarrassed of his father or annoyed with Harry's handling of the situation at his father's expense.

"Ready?" Harry whispered, as the Weird Sisters hit a first note.

"Absolutely," said Susan, and Harry started moving her body with his, but Susan was somewhat rigid and made sure every move was flawless. After a few minutes, Susan relaxed and allowed Harry to flow the two of them. "I can't believe you've only had lessons for a few weeks."

Harry blushed. "It's not as if we're doing any of those fancy moves," he tilted his head towards Fleur and Roger, and then Cedric and Cho.

"Too ostentatious," Susan shook her head. "I like the way we're dancing. It's nice, soft and elegant."

"Like you," said Harry in a low whisper.

"Aw." Susan crept a little closer to him.

At some point, Harry realised that Neville and Ginny had also joined the dance-floor, while Dumbledore was dancing with McGonagall, and a few other couples.

"If you'd rather not dance anymore, we can go and sit," Susan offered him the choice.

"Bored of me already?" Harry asked her teasingly. "You want to dance, don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Let's do another song and then get something to drink," said Harry.

"That sounds like a plan," Susan inched closer.

Soon, Harry was pouring punch for them. Susan opted for a grape-flavoured drink while Harry took an orange-flavoured one.

"Swap you some," said Susan, and she tried a bit of Harry's. "Nah. I prefer mine."

"So do I," said Harry, and finished her grape juice.

"Meanie."

"Serves you right," said Harry. "You did that to my butterbeer last month."

Susan's mood dampened slightly. "Do you remember what you said after I did that?"

Harry frowned, shaking his head.

"You said you didn't know if you liked me or not," said Susan. Harry's eyes widened. "Do you know now?"

"I uh... I mean..."

Susan chuckled. "Not that again."

"What I mean," Harry said firmly, "is that I really enjoy spending time with you, Susan. You are unlike everyone else I know."

"How so?"

Harry suddenly felt a surge of confidence on seeing her lips tremble, and he took her hand. "You are different because I really like holding your hand and it saddens me every time I let go."

Susan brightened. "Have you considered poetry, Harry?"

Harry didn't hesitate. "Only when you're in front of me."

Someone coughed. "Excuse me."

Harry turned his head. He saw Wayne Hopkins from Hufflepuff with Justin and Hannah.

"Susan, can I have a dance with you?" Wayne asked pleadingly.

Susan looked uncertainly at Harry.

Harry restrained his urge to snap at Wayne, recalling Krum's advice, and he took a deep breath. "It's your call, Susan, if you want to dance with other friends of yours. I promised Ginny and Hermione a dance too."

Susan smiled at him and went with Wayne. Seeing her leave made his stomach turn slightly but then he saw Ron and Parvati having a verbal spar, where Ron was yelling at Parvati that she couldn't just go and dance with any random bloke.

"No," Harry muttered to himself. "I definitely don't want to do a Ron."

"Talking to ourselves, Potter," Draco Malfoy headed towards him with Tracey. "That's the first sign of insanity, they say."

"Who says? Your mind healer?" asked Harry.

Draco chuckled. He looked slightly worried. "Something's going on, Potter," he whispered.

"Yes, the Yule Ball."

"Shut up," snapped Draco. "I'm being serious here. My father's on edge. Professor Snape's on edge. Karkarof's on edge." He looked intently as if trying to convey a message.

Harry blinked.

Draco threw his hands in despair. "Never mind," he said, turning to leave.

"Malfoy," Harry called out. "There's something I want to ask." The blonde boy stopped. "From everything I've seen, a house-elf cannot act against his master's best interests. How did Dobby manage to overcome this and warn me during my second year?"

Draco shrugged. "I have no idea what nonsense you're talking about."

"Malfoy," Harry said seriously in a low undertone. "Did you set your house-elf to get me expelled and then break my arm during a Quidditch match?"

Draco Malfoy sprang back. "And here I was, thinking you would bend over backwards in gratitude for my mother's attempt to warn you... Gryffindorks, these days..."

There was one mystery solved. "Tell her thanks," said Harry.

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Draco huffed. "I hope you drown during the second task."

Harry chuckled, surprised at Malfoy's implied him about the next task being underwater. He left his seat and walked towards the

dance floor. He saw Ginny dancing with Michael Corner and looking distinctly at unease.

"Mind if I..." Harry said, but without waiting for Michael to respond, he allowed Ginny to take his hand. "You looked uncomfortable."

Ginny unabashedly threw her arms around Harry. "My hero," she said.

Harry chuckled. "Anytime. You're my favourite damsel in distress."

Ginny's smile faded and one of her fist came dangerously close to Harry's face.

Harry balked slightly. "Eh... if you hit me, I'll tell Susan's aunty."

Ginny giggled. She danced quietly for a while, content to be held by Harry.

"How's your night been so far? Has Neville been looking after you?"

Ginny looked slightly disappointed. "He tried," she said. "But our friendship just doesn't extend to anything more... there's no chemistry between us..."

"Oh." Harry scanned the hall and saw Neville dancing with Hannah Abbott.

"So we decided to play wingmen to each other," said Ginny. "Just my luck that he got someone he's enjoying dancing with and I got Corner..."

"Hey, you've got me now," said Harry.

Ginny didn't look too happy about that. "Only for one song," she said quietly. "And only when you manage to keep your eyes away from Susan."

Harry looked at her apologetically. He had been observing Susan in what he believed was a surreptitious manner, but evidently not.

"How's it been for you?"

"Very nice," said Harry. "Susan and I are getting along very well. She left to dance with Wayne Hopkins. She danced with Justin Finch-Fletchley and now she's with Terry Boot. I think I'll move in after this dance... if you don't mind, that is..."

"A part of me does," Ginny admitted, and Harry's grasp tightened around her. "But... let's drift towards Susan. I'll take care of Terry for you."

"Thanks, Ginny," said Harry.

"Harry," Susan called out, when she saw him and Ginny drifting towards them. She slipped out of Terry's arms and moved towards Harry. "Ginny, may I?"

"Of course," Ginny was unable to mask her disappointment as she walked to Terry and joined him for the next dance.

"Are you having a good time?" asked Harry.

"Yes, very," said Susan. "Wayne and Justin are good friends of mine. Thank you for letting me dance with them."

"Of course," said Harry. Unable to resist, he reached to her face and flicked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I've wanted to do that all night."

"Push my hair behind my ear?" Susan was surprised.

"Touch your hair and see if it's as silky as it looks," he said.

Susan giggled. "You're without doubt the sweetest boy I've ever met."

"Not a pig then?"

"No, not at all," said Susan.

"So, you're not going to tell your aunty to throw me in prison?" asked Harry teasingly.

"She can't do that without a fair trial, now, can she?" Susan shot back.

"Hey, I'm sorry about that," Harry apologised again. "I really didn't want to bore you with that political talk."

Susan's expression clouded slightly.

"You okay?" Harry asked in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Susan. "Can we take a break from dancing? Go outside for fresh air or something."

Harry nodded. He led her out of the great hall, ignoring the eyes of her aunt that were boring holes on his back, and they went to the courtyard. There were other couples there as well, and maintaining a healthy distance from them, Harry and Susan found a spot.

"It's lovely," said Susan, looking at the moon.

"I wonder what Professor Lupin is up to these days," said Harry.

"You were close to him, weren't you?" Susan asked, leaning against Harry, with the back of her head against his chest.

"He was a friend of my father's," said Harry.

Susan frowned.

"What?"

"You said you didn't know magic until Hagrid came to tell you," she pointed out. "Then Professor Lupin never came to you before?"

"No," Harry said. He could hear how strained his voice sounded. Susan had pointed out something he had not wanted to think of before. Remus Lupin may have been a friend of James Potter's, but he never made an effort to get to know Harry Potter. Not like Sirius.

"Can I tell you a secret?" asked Harry. "Well... I'd rather this not be a secret and the whole world knew of it, but well..."

"Go on," said Susan.



"What I was saying earlier, that's all true." Harry was stroking her hair gently. "Sirius Black... he was innocent. Crouch threw him in Azkaban without a trial. Sirius Black didn't do anything he was accused of. He was framed."

"But... but there were witnesses."

"Muggles," said Harry. "Muggles, who can easily be fooled with magic. There was no trial, Susan."

"How do you know?" asked Susan cautiously.

"Last year, Sirius Black cornered us – Ron, Hermione and me, in the Shrieking Shack," said Harry. He saw Susan's face become concerned and he wrapped his arms around her protectively. "It turns out... Pettigrew is alive. Sirius was trying to catch Pettigrew."

"That's..." Susan was speechless.

"... hard to believe."

Both Harry and Susan jumped and turned around. Amelia Bones was standing there, observing the two.

"Do you have evidence to back this story?" she asked.

Harry frowned, but Susan beat him to it.

"Aunty, don't you always say 'innocent, until proven guilty'?" Susan challenged her. "Then why should someone have to prove his innocence when he hasn't yet been proven guilty?"

Amelia Bones looked slightly troubled at the question. "I will have a full enquiry be made on this, Mr Potter. My only concern is that the Minister will order me to shut all investigations until after the election..."

Harry frowned. He didn't like Fudge very much.

"I believe I can help there, Amelia."

Harry repressed an urge to groan.

"Hello, Harry," Rita Skeeter flashed a grin at him.

Harry forced himself to smile back politely. "Ms Skeeter," he acknowledged her, recalling how Dumbledore had greeted her during the weighing of the wands. "I must point out I am not twelve years old... and I wasn't crying during our last interview... Your quill was writing things that weren't very accurate..."

"The Daily Prophet has been publishing articles written using a Quick Quotes Quill?" Amelia Bones looked at Rita with narrowed eyes. "I believe you may warn Mr Cuffe that the DMLE will be investigating this allegation."

"Amelia, honey," Rita looked at her sympathetically. "If you think your previous investigation about Sirius Black has little chances of surviving, how in Merlin's name do you think an investigation against the Daily Prophet will survive?" She turned to Harry. "But, you and I, Mr Potter... we can start a tide that this Fudge administration will be helpless to stop."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I overheard part of your story about Sirius Black," said Rita. "What a tragic story... it will sell like hotcakes... all I need is a human element to it... either from Mr Black himself or someone related to him."

"I'm his godson," said Harry.

Rita's eyes widened and she looked like Santa Claus had just singled her out for a very special gift that Christmas. "Really! What a story! Surely, Harry, you can see what a goldmine you're sitting on... I'm so disappointed you didn't tell me of this the last time we met..." She looked slightly annoyed.

"You terrified me."

Rita was thrown off, for the first time since she had arrived. She looked abashed. "Oh. I didn't realise. How about this? You give me a full interview about Sirius Black and I will publish it as it is. No Quick Quotes Quill. No playing with the facts. The truth is more wonderful than any fiction that I can come up with. And I will try to be less intimidating."

"Harry, I'm not sure..." Amelia Bones began.

Harry turned to her. "Can you guarantee a trial for a man who was sent to prison without receiving any?"

Amelia had the grace to look embarrassed.

"In that case, Ms Skeeter," said Harry. "How about tomorrow in Hogsmeade at three?"

"It's a date!" Rita Skeeter was pleased.

When the reporter left, Amelia Bones looked at Harry sharply. "I hope you know what you've signed yourself up for. When Rita Skeeter's done, you will have a horde of angry politicians after you."

Harry nodded. "But hopefully my godfather will be able to step up fearlessly in the right side of the law and protect me from them."

"Aunty, don't," Susan stopped Amelia from responding. "You'll let Harry do this unless you want me to question and doubt everything you've taught me about justice and law."

Amelia Bones sighed. "On one hand, I'm proud of what you're doing. On the other hand, I'm concerned you might have bitten off more than you can chew." She looked at her watch. "It's past midnight. I believe you should both return to your dormitories. Harry, good luck. For the tournament and securing your godfather's freedom. I will, of course, do whatever I need in my duties to uphold the law whilst obeying the directions of my superior, the Minister of Magic."

"Thanks," said Harry, beginning to realise that Amelia Bones was constrained in what she could do.

Notes: Feedback has been positive so far, that's reassuring and encouraging. Yes, there will be no character bashing at all and Ginn will remain a positive character throughout (although her role will fluctuate in importance). I really appreciate reviews and would like to hear the thoughts of more of my readers – whether those thoughts are positive, negative or neutral. Suggestions are always welcome, although I can't guarantee I will incorporate it into my stories.

The next update will take a bit longer - perhaps at some point next weekend.

## Chapter 3

"So, what do you think?"

Harry looked at Sirius with excitement. His godfather had come to a cave in Hogsmeade and Harry had sneaked out a box of hot food from Hogwarts for him. Sirius looked weak and haggard, and yet, very pleased to see his godson.

"This is incredible," said Sirius. "I can't believe you did this."

The article was published that morning, exactly a month after the interview, and was as such:

### Butterbeer with Harry Potter

By Rita Skeeter

The boy needs no introduction to any magical person in Britain, perhaps even in Europe. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, has recently been selected as a Champion in the Triwizard Tournament being hosted in Hogwarts School.

On Christmas Eve, I was pleasantly surprised to see Harry Potter with his date, a striking young witch called Susan Bones, in the courtyard of the castle, looking at the moon, like other love-struck couples. The two of them, completely oblivious to all others, spoke of certain things that disturbed me, prompting me to invite Harry for a chat over a Butterbeer in Hogsmeade the following day, after seeking permission from Miss Bones, of course.

Harry joined me promptly, wearing casual grey jeans and a green home-made jumper that matched and reflected the colour of his eyes.

Q. Merry Christmas, Harry. Did you receive many presents?

A. You too, Rita. Yes, most of my friends got me something.

Q. Harry, can you repeat the concerns you raised about the judicial system last night?

A. Yes, Rita. I'm not well-educated in law or politics, but there's something I know very clearly. Everyone has a right to fair trial, and everyone is innocent before the law, until proven guilty. It is disappointing to note that I have failed to see these being practised in the magical world.

Q. That's a shocking accusation. Why do you say so?

A. Sirius Black. Everybody fears him. Rita, I myself feared Sirius Black for most of last year. After all, Black betrayed my parents to [He Who Must Not Be Named!] and killed Peter Pettigrew in an attack that took the lives of many muggles. But do you know something? Sirius Black did not receive a fair trial. Or any trial at all. On Bartemius Crouch's orders, he was sent straight to Azkaban without any proper investigation or evidence.

Q. To be fair, there were eye-witnesses to Black's murder of Pettigrew, and Pettigrew's declaration of Black's guilt.

A. So, why not give him a trial and find him guilty? There is something sinister behind this cover-up. I did some research and found that Mr Crouch, while giving those orders, had just come out of a trial in which he sent his son to Azkaban. Afterwards, he was seeing mind healers in St Mungo's for a year. Surely, he wasn't in a position to exercise clear judgment at that moment. Someone should have questioned Crouch's abuse of the judicial system. Perhaps it is not too late now.

Q. Is this passionate cry for justice on a matter of principle alone or do you have a closer connection to this case?

A. In my research, I also found out that Sirius Black is my godfather. I may be wrong here, and Black might very well be a Death Eater who did everything he is accused of. But I would like this to be established, beyond all reasonable doubt, by hearing him reveal the truth under Veritaserum. This is no more than what the law guarantees to every citizen of this country. Is that too much to ask for my godfather?

Q. Not at all. Do you think the Fudge administration is to blame for this fiasco?

A. The Minister of Magic, when this travesty of justice took place, wasn't Cornelius Fudge, so I don't see how this is his mistake. He has a duty, now that this omission has been pointed out, to make sure justice is finally given. But he shouldn't be held responsible for Minister Bagnold and Director Crouch's actions. It's not fair to blame someone for things they didn't do, just because they are in front of you.

Q. That last remark sounded like it came from very close to your heart. Would you like to elaborate?

A. Not really.

Q. Very well. Moving on to less distressing topics, how are you getting along with the foreign guests to Hogwarts?

A. Quite well, actually. I have spoken with Viktor Krum several times and we get along quite well. He took a close friend of mine Hermione Granger to the Yule Ball as his date. They looked happy together. I haven't spoken much to Fleur Delacour or others from Beauxbatons, but they seem nice, and some of them dance very well.

Q. Would you say you have a good chance of winning the Triwizard Tournament for Hogwarts?

A. I suppose everyone who was selected by the Goblet of Fire has a good chance of winning the Tournament. Don't forget that Cedric Diggory is the true Hogwarts Champion. My entry was something of an anomaly, and I believe there's an investigation going on to find out which joker thought it would be a good idea to put my name in. But yes, I'm trying my hardest to win, and I hope the best Champion wins.

Q. Your companion in the Yule Ball was Susan Bones. Is the most eligible fourteen year old no longer available?

A. Err... I really enjoyed our date last night, but I don't think I should talk of this without her being present.

Q. One final question, Harry. Let's keep this light-hearted. What's your ideal Christmas present?

A. I really look forward to the jumpers which Mrs Weasley sends me every year on Christmas. I got the one I'm currently wearing earlier this morning.

Thank you for your time, Harry.

As the humble young man finished his Butterbeer and left with a dazzling smile, I started asking myself the most important point raised in this interview – will Minister Fudge make sure justice is finally given, now that the omission of Crouch and Bagnold is revealed?

"Harry, have you considered a career in politics?" asked Sirius. "You'd be good at this, the way you handled all sides in this interview."

Harry blushed. "Rita Skeeter helped me correct some of the answers. The one with Fudge was mostly her doing. I insisted on adding that final line."

"You seem to be making some powerful friends," said Sirius. "Ludo Bagman, Amelia Bones and Rita Skeeter."

"Sirius, I want to ask you something," said Harry. "Mr Weasley took me to the Quidditch World Cup to the top box. I've heard many people say that showed my support of Fudge for the coming elections... do you think Mr Weasley manipulated me?"

Sirius looked at Harry contemplatively. "I haven't spoken to Arthur in many years and even before that, I only knew him very briefly, not as well as you do. You must ask yourself: is he the kind of man who would do something like that?"

Harry frowned. Sirius' question was eerily similar to what Krum had posed when he was concerned about Susan's intentions in demanding a public proposal from him. "You want me to trust my instincts?" he asked.

Sirius was surprised at his insight. "Yes," he said simply.

"No, I don't think he'd do something like that," said Harry.

"There you have it," said Sirius.



"I just don't like it that something so ordinary has such strong political implications!" Harry frowned.

"You're famous, Harry," Sirius said sorrowfully. "More than that. You're the magical world's Saviour. Everything you do will have strong political consequences. I wish... I wish I could have shielded you from this."

"It's not your fault," said Harry. He hesitated. "There's something else."

"Go on."

"Professor Lupin," said Harry.

"Ah." Sirius rubbed his forehead. "I was wondering if you'd ever touch this topic."

"Did he ever visit you in prison?" asked Harry. "If only to ask 'why'?"

Sirius shook his head morosely.

"He never came to check on me either," said Harry. "Not even to just say 'hello' or 'happy birthday'." He paused. "He's not you."

Sirius raised his head and looked at Harry with deep emotion. "Harry, don't... I blame myself every day for letting Hagrid take you from me that night... don't put me on a pedestal. I'm as flawed as anyone else. I've done many things I'm not proud of. Especially when I was in Hogwarts. Everybody makes mistakes, Harry. That doesn't necessarily make them a bad person. I have made many more mistakes than Remus."

"Well." Harry got up, unable to look at his godfather's pained expression. "It's getting late. I'm meeting Neville and Ginny in the pub."

"Neville and Ginny," Sirius repeated oddly. "What about Hermione and Susan?"

"Hermione's in the library," said Harry. "And Susan wanted to spend some time with her housemates. She agreed to be my girlfriend yesterday, but she doesn't want to alienate her friends."

He left the cave and walked towards Three Broomsticks, ignoring the whispers that followed him after the news article. He saw Neville and Ginny waiting for him and he joined them with a fresh round of Butterbeer.

"Just to warn you, Harry," said Ginny, sounding slightly miffed as she held the newspaper with his interview, "mum's going to be all over you the next time she sees you." She was pouting. "I used to be her favourite but I can't compete against your response to Skeeter's final question."

"Tough luck," said Harry, patting her head fondly.

"Unless..." Ginny looked at him seriously. "Unless, I tell her that you broke my heart. That will bring her sympathy back to me and make you the bad guy."

Harry chuckled, missing the hint of a tear in Ginny's eyes. "Yeah? I think you're too nice to do something that evil. Besides, I was kind of planning to loan you my Firebolt for the summer."

Ginny looked at him in shock.

"The Dursleys won't let me fly," Harry shrugged. "And we'll need a new Chaser next year. Angelina said she'll quit due to her NEWTs."

"What about Ron?" asked Ginny uncertainly.

"Ron's more of Keeper material," said Harry. "He doesn't need to practice moves as much as you do for the trials."

"Gee, thanks, Harry," Ginny replied sarcastically. "You're saying I'm not good enough to make it to the team as I am."

Harry looked at Neville with an incredulous expression. When had he suggested that? "I thought you'd like having the broom..."

"Of course, I want to keep the Firebolt!" Ginny interrupted him. She looked regretful. "I'm sorry, that wasn't fair of me. I'm not in a very

good mood today. Shall we just head back and practice some new spells? Hermione might have found some more."

Hermione had indeed found some new spells. Her list was as such.

1. Stupefy... stuns an opponent
2. Reducto... blasts a solid object
3. Episkey... minor healing spell
4. Expulso... makes objects explode, more powerful than Reducto
5. Summoning charm
6. Banishing charm
7. Reparo... repairs broken or damaged objects

"Wow," Harry read the list. "That's a lot of useful spells for daily life."

"Only you, Harry," Ginny muttered, "would consider blasting, healing and exploding as spells for daily use."

Later, when they returned to Gryffindor tower, Harry pulled Ginny aside. "What's bugging you? You've been snappish all day."

Ginny looked away. "Nothing. I'll be fine tomorrow."

Harry hesitated, unsure of what to say.

"I'll be fine, Harry," said Ginny firmly. "I should get some sleep, it's getting late."

Harry let go of her. He saw Neville looking at him anxiously. "What's bugging her?"

Neville hesitated. "It's a personal matter, Harry. She'll deal with it."

"You know?" Harry asked him.

Neville nodded. "But I promised not to speak of it to anyone."

"Great," Harry muttered. "My most reliable friends are keeping secrets from me now."

Neville frowned at him. "We're not allowed to?" he asked tightly. "You keep your big secrets about your godfather and all that's fine,

but Ginny has one problem, which she brings to me instead of you, and that's not allowed?"

Harry was stunned. He had never seen Neville angry before. "I didn't mean that... I'm sorry," he looked ashamed. "I just... I just feel guilty near Ginny, okay? About how we ignored her last year after the Chamber of Secrets... and even then, she's been such a good friend to me. I want to help."

Neville softened. "If you really want to do something to cheer her up, don't forget to get her something nice for Valentine's Day in a couple of weeks."

Harry froze. Suddenly, it made sense to him.

"Oh, shit!" Neville cursed, realising he had given up Ginny's secret.

"Oh, shit, indeed," Harry muttered. He looked at Neville in distress. "She wasn't joking, was she? That I broke her heart?"

Neville shook his head.

"What do I do?" asked Harry helplessly.

"Harry." Neville looked at Harry intently. "Do I look like I have a clue?"

Harry did make sure he sent Ginny a box of Honeyduke's Finest and a bouquet of flowers. He saw her face light up from across the table and she grinned at him. He had sent a similar present to Hermione as well. Seeing his two female friends content with their gifts, Harry walked towards the Hufflepuff table.

"Hey," said Harry.

"I'm waiting," said Susan, she sounded slightly irritated.

"For what," said Harry innocently.

Susan raised an eyebrow and stood up. "Do you want me to tickle you?"

"No," Harry held her off as she tried to make good her threat. "Okay, okay. I didn't send yours through the post owl because I wanted it to be special."

"Ooh." Hannah said from behind Susan.

"Shut up, Hannah," both Harry and Susan said simultaneously.

"Aw." Hannah was amused.

"It's nice and sunny outside," said Harry. "Do you want to take a picnic basket to the grounds? Maybe somewhere behind Hagrid's cottage?"

"That sounds very private and intimate," Hannah remarked. Both Harry and Susan ignored her.

Seeing Susan grin, Harry took her hand, and they both walked out of the great hall. A house-elf appeared in front of them and gave Harry a basket.

"Dobby looked after the cake you made, Harry Potter," said Dobby. "It's all here. Dobby added a few sandwiches and a flask of pumpkin juice."

"Good stuff," said Harry. "Thanks, Dobby."

Susan's lips quivered. "You made a cake... for me?"

"Actually, I made it for myself," said Harry. "But you can have a slice if you say please."

"Prat." Susan lightly hit his arm.

"But you still like me," Harry said triumphantly.

"I do," Susan conceded.

Soon, they were sitting on a mat on the grounds. Harry opened the basket and took out several self-made chocolate chip cookies and a moist and fudge chocolate cake with icing 'For Susan, with love'.

"I didn't know you could make cakes," said Susan breathlessly, as Harry handed her the knife to cut a slice. "Or cook at all." She had cut a small slice, which Harry picked up and moved to her lips. Susan chuckled as Harry stuffed it in her mouth.

"Wow," Susan chewed her mouthful. "This is good. You should try some."

Harry cut himself a tiny slice.

"You really made this?" Susan asked as she ate her second slice.

Harry nodded. "I went to the kitchen after walking you back last night. Dobby was there and he allowed me access to all the ingredients. Winky the other free-elf gave me directions."

"You're so sweet!" Susan exclaimed, grabbing Harry and kissing his lips.

"Hey!" Harry protested when there was chocolate smeared all over his mouth. He ran his tongue over it and licked it clean.

"Did you like my gift?" asked Susan. "It pales in comparison to all the effort you put in."

Harry grinned. He pulled out a small golden spherical object from his pocket and shook it. Wings came out and the Golden Snitch started buzzing in his hand, trying to free itself. He let go of it and it flew away.

"Are you kidding me?" Harry stated. The Snitch reappeared near Susan's left ear and Harry instantly grabbed it with flawless reflexes without even looking at it. "This is absolutely brilliant."

Susan moved closer and rested her head against his chest.

"Is that all the cake you're eating?" asked Harry in disappointment. "Is it not nice?"

Susan shuffled slightly so her forehead pressed against his lips. "I am going to eat my cake and have it too," she declared. "I'm going to save it until dinner and show Hannah and the other girls what my boyfriend got me."

"Show off."

"As long as I'm showing you off, I don't think you get a say in it," said Susan.

"I don't see how that logic works," said Harry.

She became serious. "We're a couple. I'm the girl. I say the logic works. That's how," Susan explained it to him clearly.

"Ah." Harry was grinning. "That makes a lot more sense." He was stroking her hair gently.

"How's your preparation for the second task going?" asked Susan.

"Quite good," said Harry. "Neville, Ginny and Hermione are drilling a lot of spells into me. I think I've learnt enough to pass NEWT level Defence and Charms."

"Wow. Really?"

"I'm exaggerating, silly," said Harry. "But I could clear the Defence OWLs without a sweat."

"Cedric told me to pass the message, if you haven't worked through your clue yet... take your egg for a bath."

"I don't know why but that just sounds wrong," Harry stated. "Take your egg... for a bath."

Susan was amused.

"Say thanks to him, but I've worked through it," said Harry. "Also, tell him to be ready to be outclassed yet again."

Susan rolled her eyes. "A lot of Hufflepuffs are very ashamed of how they've been treating you."

"Let me guess," said Harry nonchalantly. "My interview where I gave full credit to Cedric, restated that I didn't put my name in and accused them silently of blaming me without reason."

"Yes, that's the main reason," said Susan. She looked at Harry seriously. "Give them a second chance, Harry. We Hufflepuffs aren't bad, and we learn from our mistakes."

Harry looked at her. "I can say for a certainty that there's at least one Hufflepuff I am very fond of and don't think is bad at all."

"Oh, really?" said Susan. "Do I know this person?"

"I think you might," said Harry thoughtfully. "This little ginger girl... thinks she's a real toughie but..." Harry stopped abruptly when Susan swiftly moved and straddled him, pushing him to the ground, with her face inches from his, while she pinned his shoulders.

"But what, Harry?" she was glaring at him with part amusement and part challenging.

"But..." Harry swallowed. "She's as gentle as an angel, as sweet as... chocolate cake... and she... really doesn't want to hurt me."

"Then what does she want to do, Harry?" Susan asked him.

"Maybe... she wants to kiss me because I made her a nice cake."

"Hmm... I think you pass this one with an Outstanding," said Susan. She pressed her lips against his.

Sometime later, Harry was disappointed when Susan parted her lips from him, but he also took that opportunity to get a few breaths of air.

"Wow," said Harry. "It gets better every time."

"Yeah." Susan regarded him. "You aren't a slobbering mess anymore."

"Hey." Harry looked disgruntled. "Why do you get to insult me all the time?"

Susan chuckled. "That's the natural order of things. You'll get used to it... in time." She gave a quick peck on Harry's lips, completely ending any argument he might have been thinking of.



The morning of the Second Task approached altogether too soon, but Harry felt prepared. He was slightly disappointed when he didn't see Susan at breakfast. Hermione wasn't there either. Then he realised. The rhyme. They'd take something he'd sorely miss.

Or someone.

"No." Blood drained from Harry's face. "Not Susan." His vision became blurry and he felt his knees buckle.

Perhaps his friends also realised the same thing at once, because Ginny quickly supported him. "Harry, listen to me," she said firmly, stepping in front of him. "This is a tournament and Dumbledore is organising it. Nothing will happen to Susan. Her aunt is also organising it. Nothing will happen to her, do you hear me."

Harry kept looking at her with a lost expression.

"Now, you listen to me carefully," said Ginny. "You'll go out there and act like the splendid wizard you are and get Susan back. In doing so, you will win most points and everyone will cheer you. Because, this is a tournament. Not life and death." She took a deep breath. "Your turn. Take a deep breath."

Harry took a deep breath. He smiled at Ginny but did as she told. He hugged her. "Thanks," he said.

Neville sighed in relief. "Mate, you looked like you were going to have a breakdown."

Harry nodded. "I think I was, but Ginny saved me." He turned to the redhead, who had begun to blush now. "My hero."

"That's all right," Ginny shrugged him off. "All in a day's work. Little boys in distress and whatnot."

Harry decided to let her get away with that remark with just a glare. He walked to the other Champions, where Fleur was going through a similar episode as him on realising her sister had been taken. Hermione was the one Viktor would 'sorely miss' and Cho for Cedric.

He nodded at the others. "Listen guys," said Harry. "I'm less concerned about the points for this one than to get Susan back. And Hermione."

"I don't care about zis silly tournament," Fleur was nearly hysterical. "I want my Gabby back."

"How about this? We all take our own routes but wait until everyone's there," suggested Harry. "If at the end of an hour, someone has failed to come, we free their hostage as well and return together. The fastest swimmer wins."

"I like that idea," Cedric said. "I'm in."

"So am I!" Fleur declared.

"And I." Viktor Krum looked disturbed. "Herm-own-ninny and I had a fight last night... I have to apologise..." He stopped abruptly.

"Don't tell the judges about our plan," said Harry. "They might not approve."

Soon, the horn was blown. Harry waited to see what the others were doing. Krum did a partial self-transfiguration to change his upper body to a shark and jumped in. Both Cedric and Fleur did the Bubblehead Charm before following suit.

Everybody was waiting for Harry.

He first conjured Bluebell Flames and steadied them to float around him. He felt the heat but forced himself to ignore it. He would be glad to have it in a bit. Then he cast the Bubblehead Charm to cover his head. Then he transfigured his shoes to swimfins. This was also Hermione's idea, and he couldn't help smile with the knowledge that she didn't share it with Viktor.

With the Bluebell Flames around him, Harry jumped into the water and sped through. The flippers gave him a greater speed than the others and he soon sped past the others. He paused occasionally to check the direction where Susan was being held using the point me spell. Barely had he reached the merfolk village that his Bluebell flames disappeared. Twenty minutes had gone. He cast the spell

again, creating a new set of Bluebells to keep him warm, and he searched for Susan.

A merman swam towards him, entranced by the Bluebell. And then another. Harry, seeing how enchanted they were by the mystical fire that gave them heat, conjured more and sent them in different directions, luring the merfolk away.

He saw the four hostages tied to posts at the end of the merfolk village and he cut the ropes off Susan with a swift Diffindo. When he moved to Hermione, an old merman with a trident swam towards him furiously.

The merman shook his head and gestured for Harry to leave with Susan.

Harry looked at Hermione, Cho and the little girl who was clearly Fleur's sister, and shook his head. He settled on a rock with Susan in his arms, indicating he didn't want to fight, but he wasn't leaving without them either. Any violence that occurred would be the merman's fault.

The merman observed Harry for a few moments before retreating.

Viktor Krum was the next to arrive. He freed Hermione and seemed to be in two minds whether to just leave or stick to his word. The semi-shark Krum decided to join Harry on the rock. By then, Harry's second set of Bluebells also disappeared and he started a new one. Cedric also arrived and he seemed surprised to see the other two sitting like that but he also joined them with Cho, and they waited patiently until the third Bluebell finished. Then, Harry, conjuring a fourth one, moved towards the little girl. The merfolk chieftain looked to be in two-minds, but acquiesced when on realising that the humans weren't leaving without all of the hostages. And the hour was up, so it was no longer with responsibility. Perhaps in some strange fashion, the merman approved of their decision.

Harry's greater speed was countered by his carrying two hostages, and they all returned at roughly similar times. Krum was the first by a mere second, followed by Harry and then Cedric.

Ginny and Neville were the first to come to him and they helped him get out of the water. "Impressive." Ginny said sharply. "They

somehow put up screens showing how each of you performed. Harry, that was incredibly stupid but very noble. Just like you."

"Oh dear." Susan groaned. "What did he do?"

"He refused to just leave with you," said Ginny. "He waited until the other Champions got to their hostages, and somehow convinced them to wait as well, and then he freed the final hostage for Fleur Delacour, and they came back together."

Meanwhile, Fleur rushed to get hold of her sister and kissed Harry's cheek.

Harry saw Susan fume silently at Fleur and wrapped his arms around his girlfriend. "It didn't mean a thing. She was just relieved her sister's safe."

"I suppose," said Susan. "Doesn't give her the right to kiss another girl's man."

"I'm your man, am I?"

"And don't you forget it," Susan told him.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," replied Harry, trying hard to tune out Ginny's face out of his vision.

Dumbledore cleared his voice. "We have an interesting turn of events here. Of all the situations and potential display of values and principles that we foresaw, this level of teamwork and camaraderie was not even considered. I am heartened to see all three schools coming together in this manner to ensure the safety of all individuals and finally believe that this Tournament has lived up to its expectations. Please, a round of applause for all four Champions."

Harry flushed when he heard the applause. Even Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Susan clapped for him while standing just next to him.

"We have decided to award full points to Mr Potter, Mr Krum and Mr Diggory and an average of five from each judge for Miss Delacour."

"I deserved zero!" Fleur was still hysterical, but her eight year old sister was trying to calm her down.

Dumbledore walked towards Harry. "Mr Potter, may I have a word in private."

Harry walked with Dumbledore.

"How has the year been for you so far?" asked Dumbledore, as they walked the familiar route to his office.

Harry thought of the question. "The worst and the best, at the same time."

Dumbledore waited for him to elaborate.

"I lost Ron and Hermione as my best friends," said Harry. "And my image of Gryffindor was shattered. I was lonely and sad to begin with."

"Things have improved, I believe."

"Yes," Harry nodded. "I discovered two amazing friends in Ginny and Neville. Mr Bagman is also very kind to me. I regained Hermione as a good friend. I'm working on salvaging some sort of friendship with Ron. My image of Slytherin has also changed. And... Susan..." Harry grinned happily.

Dumbledore smiled. "Miss Bones, yes. Interesting choice."

"You don't approve?" Harry asked curiously.

Dumbledore tutted. "Someone else's approval or disapproval is a rather needless consideration in matters relating to the heart. The reason I find it interesting is because of her aunt's political aspirations."

Harry frowned.

"I will not concern you with that..."

"No, please tell me. Nobody ever does," said Harry. "I want to know what's going on around me. I am involved as much as anyone, Professor Dumbledore, and I want to know when people are manipulating me for their political means, like I was this summer."

Dumbledore observed him carefully. "Ice mice." The gargoyle that guarded his office made way and they walked up silently.

Harry grinned at Fawkes, the phoenix who had saved him and Ginny a couple of years ago. The phoenix bobbed its head once on seeing Harry and went back to sleep.

"I am surprised, Harry," said Dumbledore, when he was settled behind his desk. "I see you mature and grow before my eyes into someone your parents would take tremendous pride in."

Harry flushed at the praise.

"A bit too fast, perhaps," said Dumbledore, with a hint of sadness. "You have entered an arena I would have tried to shield you from for a few more years."

"Sir?"

"Politics, Harry, is the dirtiest game devised by mankind," said Dumbledore, sounding tired. "You may not realise it but you have declared yourself a major player in the magical world of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

Harry swallowed. Something in the way Dumbledore said that made it sound like Harry had just signed his suicide note.

"I will not guide you through this quicksand of complexities, because that will be counterproductive to your benefit," said Dumbledore mystically. "But I will give you enough so you can make a better judgment from here on by yourself."

"All this because of my interview to Rita Skeeter?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have advised it at all, but your motive was flawless."

"Professor?"

"Cornelius Fudge has withdrawn the execution order on Sirius Black," said Dumbledore. "If Mr Black is apprehended, he will be remanded to the custody of the DMLE where a full Wizengamot hearing will determine his guilt."

"That's great!" Harry said, not sure why Dumbledore didn't sound too pleased with that result.

"Having said that," Dumbledore leaned forward seriously. "The Ministry of Magic is a dangerous place. Accidents occur frequently, and despite all your attempts, very few people would shed a tear if Sirius Black happened to slip and fall down a flight of stairs on his way to the courtroom. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Harry was stunned. "You're saying although Fudge has publicly taken my side, he will try to get Sirius killed before he is pardoned. Why?"

Dumbledore took a moment to consider his response. "What version do you want to hear. The political motivations that guide him, or the practical end-effect that is relevant here."

Harry frowned. "Both."

"The Ministerial elections are next year," said Dumbledore. "I'm sure you've heard of it. Fudge is running again, so are Amos Diggory and Amelia Bones."

Harry was surprised, he didn't know that Amelia Bones and Amos Diggory were running. Moreover, he was surprised that he hadn't bothered finding it out.

"Despite your attempt to shield Fudge from the repercussions of the blunder involving Sirius Black, thereby perhaps making him more amenable to aid you; the fact is that he represents the Ministry as it stands and all its failings. Fudge wants this Blackgate scandal to disappear with minimum fuss." Dumbledore took a lemon candy from a bowl in front of him and offered one to Harry. "Moreover, one of Fudge's biggest financial backer is Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy's wife is Narcissa Black, and her son stands to gain the Black fortune if Sirius Black is unable to clear his name and appoint a different heir."

Harry's eyes widened. "So, Fudge really doesn't want Sirius to be freed... or alive."

"That is precisely my point," said Dumbledore. "But now, with your interview, if Sirius Black continues to remain a fugitive from justice,

he is making the case against him much harder. People will question why he isn't surrendering to the Ministry for a trial if he is truly innocent. But if he does surrender..."

Harry rubbed his forehead.

Dumbledore chuckled. "A telling reaction," he said.

"But what I don't get is why you said it was interesting that Susan and I were together," Harry said. "What's she got to do with all of this politics."

"Harry..." Dumbledore sounded sad. "I don't want to alienate you... nor do I want to place too many burdens on your shoulders before you are ready to take them."

"What do you mean?"

"You once asked me," said Dumbledore, "why Voldemort came after you? Why one of the most feared Dark Lords of this century wanted to kill a mere baby?" Dumbledore leaned forward. "I give you a choice now. I'll answer one of these questions. Politics or Voldemort. Not both, just one. Choose your path, my boy, because each diverges from the other and you stand at the crossroads now."

Harry was confused. "Why do they diverge? I don't understand."

"One route is clear, filled with choices in simple terminology of right and wrong, and I can easily tell you what is right and what is not," said Dumbledore. "The other is mired in complexities where right and wrong often become different facets of the same thing. Your entire personality and experiences will change depending on which path you take. On one path, I will gladly guide you to the very end; but on the other, I will have to let you find your own footing."

"Susan," Harry whispered. "I want to know why you disapprove of my relationship with Susan."

"Ah. I had rather hoped you would choose the other route. Very well. As I said earlier, my disapproval should mean nothing to your decision," said Dumbledore. "But here it is: First of all, there was a scheduled interrogation for all individuals concerned to determine how you were chosen for the Tournament. Essentially, Amos



Diggory wanted to expose you as a fraud and Director Bones was indifferent either way but she owed Amos a favour. However, your appearance to the Ball with her niece changed that; Madam Bones would not consider ruining young Susan's evening."

"But that's a good thing!" Harry protested.

"Furthermore, Madam Bones registered her candidature for next year's ministerial elections on December 27, 1994. Something happened just before that to give her the confidence that she might win against Fudge and Diggory."

"That's... that's a few days after the Yule Ball," said Harry. "You mean... she's scheming to use me to gain popularity."

"It would appear logical to conclude so," said Dumbledore.

Harry felt a fire rage within him. Perhaps something showed in his face, because Dumbledore raised his hand to silence him.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore leaned forward. "Here is the biggest... and perhaps the only secret to remain standing in this path you have chosen: how can you make use of her schemes to your advantage?"

Harry recoiled from Dumbledore as if he'd been scorched. This was a side of Dumbledore he had never seen before. A master of manipulations.

"Always think of that," said Dumbledore. "Take my word, Harry. Other than the friends you have already made, trust no one, and even with them, always hesitate. Look at every face with suspicion as if they have an ulterior motive. Understand that motive and apply it to your interests."

Harry considered Dumbledore for a while. "How do I know... how can I be assured that you don't have an ulterior motive right now?"

Dumbledore leaned back with a satisfied smile. "Harry, you can rest assured that I do have an ulterior motive. Perhaps many. I always try to have at least a few."

Harry was stunned. His image of Albus Dumbledore was falling apart in front of him, and it was Dumbledore himself who was doing

the shattering. But in its stead something else was rising. A respect, but of a different kind. Earlier, Dumbledore was a kindly grandfather who would always pick Harry up when he fell and put salve on his bruises.

This was a much more dangerous Dumbledore. One who could immediately wipe Harry out of the chess board if he wanted. But instead, he was giving Harry several free moves. Or was he?

"The Philosopher's Stone!" Harry accused. "That was a test, wasn't it?"

Dumbledore's face turned ashen. But he gathered himself swiftly. "Believe me, had I known Voldemort was possessing Quirrell, I would not have permitted it. But yes, the chambers themselves were a test of your courage and wit."

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked quietly.

"What do you think?" Dumbledore asked in a tone matching Harry's.

"I think... no, I want to believe that you had no idea," said Harry. "But I'm not so certain now. Perhaps you wanted to test my loyalty to you, or my courage. I can believe that. But would you let Ginny suffer? I want to believe you wouldn't. But if you were willing to let me face a Cerberus, a troll and poison, and maybe even a basilisk, what's to say you didn't intend Ginny to suffer either." Harry stood up and looked at Dumbledore with disgust. "I don't think I can trust you again. Ever."

"Alas." Dumbledore looked sad again. "That was one of my ulterior motives."

Harry froze at Dumbledore's pained voice.

"If your trust in me is broken," continued Dumbledore, "then you will always hesitate from now on. That may very well be the difference between success and failure in this path."

Harry was troubled. "So this was all... all this... you were making it up?"

"Harry," Dumbledore leaned forward seriously. "Nobody was supposed to enter the third floor where the Philosopher's Stone was being guarded! Nobody! Including you!" There was power laced in his voice, and Harry was inclined to believe him. "The Chamber of Secrets," Dumbledore spat in disgust. "I would never risk a student's life in that manner. I would stand between a basilisk to shield my students with my last breath."

Harry felt ashamed he could have even thought otherwise.

Dumbledore relaxed in his seat and the aura of power vanished. "But, of course, I might be lying."

Harry grabbed his head. Involuntarily, he sat down. "I think I made the wrong decision. I should have asked about Voldemort."

"Yes, I agree." Dumbledore agreed. "At the very least, you would have left my office with a better opinion of me."

Harry raised his head and considered Dumbledore. "I don't know," he said slowly. "I think I quite like seeing the real you. Makes you almost human."

"Almost?"

"Your beard kills it," said Harry. "That makes you look like Merlin. Or Zeus." Dumbledore smiled. "But that's perhaps a deliberate image you're trying to cultivate."

"The white wizard of Hogwarts," said Dumbledore serenely. "He must guide the phoenix banner against the serpents of darkness, must he not?"

Harry rubbed his eyes. "I think it's safe to say I absolutely hate you now."

"That is an unfortunate consequence," Dumbledore sounded regretful. "I will, however, expect to treat me with utmost respect at all times... as befitting a headmaster."

"Of course," said Harry. "Professor Snape has trained me well."

"Ah. Cheap shot, Harry," said Dumbledore, he sounded hurt but oddly amused as well.

Harry couldn't explain it. He was angry with Dumbledore, but at the same time he felt invigorated, not unlike what he felt when starting a chase for the Snitch against a capable opponent.

"I believe this conversation is over," said Harry, stepping out of his seat. "I suppose I should thank you for opening my eyes."

"But that would be assuming that I am doing you a favour," said Dumbledore.

"I think you were," said Harry sharply. "I think everything you've done until I chose this path was for my best interests. I think you're messing with my head now, but before this, you've been everything I've believed you to be."

Dumbledore didn't say anything.

"I've got you there," said Harry triumphantly. "You're not as evil as you are pretending to be."

"Or maybe," said Dumbledore slowly. "That's what I want you to believe."

Harry froze. He turned around and literally ran out of the office. He didn't want to think of this surreal conversation with Dumbledore until much later. He walked to the Gryffindor common room and hurriedly searched for Neville.

"Kill me," said Harry. "Kill me now."

Neville raised an eyebrow and turned around. "Ginny, your little boy in distress needs his hero again."

"Well, you can tell him that this hero is on leave until her transfiguration essay is finished!" Ginny shot back.

Harry walked to her and peered over her shoulder to see what she was working on.

"Inanimate to animate transfiguration," Ginny replied to his unasked question, without raising her head. "I really doubt I'll ever need to transfigure a teapot into a tortoise in my life."

"You say that," said Harry, sitting next to her. "But wouldn't you love to transfigure cotton balls or stray hair in Ron's room into spiders?"

Ginny's eyes gleamed mischievously.

"Or annoying identical twin brothers into a mop and pail to clean the toilets?"

Ginny turned to Harry with interest. "Go on," she urged him.

"Or... Colin's camera into a raven that will fly away... forever..."

"How?" Ginny asked desperately. "How, o great one, can I master this noble skill?"

"First and foremost," said Harry. "What's the Life-Loss Rule?"

Ginny scrunched her face in thought. She peeked at her notes. "Life cannot be created by transfiguring an inanimate object into an animate and life cannot be destroyed by transfiguring an animate object into an inanimate."

"Wrong," said Harry. "That's just the Conservation of Life rule."

"Err... I might have fallen asleep when McGonagall was going through the rest," Ginny muttered.

"No, you weren't," Harry chided her. "Nobody falls asleep in McGonagall's class. Not even Ron. You were daydreaming, Ginny Weasley."

Ginny blushed.

"There are two distinct kinds of transfigurations you need to keep in mind when moving from inanimate to animate or vice versa," said Harry. "One of them follows the Anti-Inertia Rule and the other follows the Life-Loss Rule. The Anti-Inertia Rule is easier to understand."

"I know that," Ginny interrupted. "That transfigures a... say, stone into a Snitch that can fly."

"Exactly," said Harry. "It transfigures while giving motion or stopping it in the transfigured object. Now, if instead of a Snitch, you transfigured the stone into a butterfly?"

"But... But the butterfly won't be any better than the Snitch!" Ginny protested. "It won't have any life."

"Exactly. It's a butterfly, that for all purposes, looks like a butterfly and flies like one, but it has no life," said Harry. "So you see, the Conservation of Life rule applies there too, as it does in all transfiguration spells. You cannot create or destroy life on a target using pure transfiguration."

Ginny frowned. "So what's the Life-Loss Rule?"

"The first part is, as you said, the same as the Conservation of Life rule," said Harry. "The rest of it says: life is neither created nor destroyed when transferred from one vessel to another by a magical conductor."

"Again?"

Harry rolled his eyes. He eyed Ginny and touched her arm. "Your body is a vessel," he said. "That teapot is a vessel. The Life-Loss transfiguration transfers some life from you to the teapot while changing its shape to resemble a tortoise."

Ginny was shocked. "You mean... wizards give birth to the things they transfigure?"

"No, silly." Harry flicked her head lightly. "Think of it like blood. You give half a pint of blood but your heart pumps more back. Think of the energy that you release into the teapot like that, except your soul pumps back the energy almost instantly when you release some out of you. It's the same with the Patronus Charm."

"Oh," Ginny was stunned.

"So when you try to transfigure the teapot under the Life-Loss system, don't just think of its shape change, try to think of exactly

what you would like the tortoise to do if you were the tortoise. Give it life-like characteristics. For the tortoise, what works for me is to think of how fast I want the tortoise to move; the grass, leaves and worms that the tortoise should eat; whether I want it to be friendly to me or antagonistic to someone else, and other things like that. Give it life."

Ginny was frowning thoughtfully. "Why doesn't McGonagall teach us like this instead of making us read boring textbooks in archaic English that make no sense?"

Harry grinned at her. "I think McGonagall takes some sort of perverse pleasure in making the subject a lot harder than it is. Hermione and I worked on this in detail last year to understand it properly."

"Harry," Ginny had an important question. "So what's stopping me from doing a transfiguration under the Anti-Inertia system and make it change shape into something that resembles a live animal and pretend it was done under the Life-Loss system?"

Harry grinned, almost as if he had been expecting it. "You should ask Ron and Dean why they got a mere Acceptable in their exams last year," Harry said. "McGonagall has an inner hidden Slytherin inside her, capable of catching the sneakiest attempts of students trying to pull one over her. Students have been trying to get one over her for over thirty years. She knows every trick in the book."

"I get it," Ginny sighed. "Thanks, Harry." She smiled at him. "Now, is there a reason why you were trying to help me finish my assignment early?"

"Harry, you can rest assured that I do have an ulterior motive. Perhaps many. I always try to have at least a few."

Dumbledore's words rang in Harry's mind. Was he also doing that? Did he want something for Ginny, and was that why he had been helping her? More importantly, did Ginny always search for ulterior motives when people helped her? Did she not trust anyone?

"Why?" Harry snapped, perhaps more harshly than he intended. "Can't I just help a friend in her assignment without having an ulterior motive?" He got up to leave.

"Harry, I didn't mean it like that..."

He stopped at her heart-wrenching tone and turned back. She looked tired and helpless. Harry took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Ginny, that wasn't fair." He sunk on the couch next to her. "I had a long chat with Dumbledore and I just wanted to take my mind off it. Transfiguration seemed like a pleasant thing to talk about."

"Do you want to talk about it?" invited Ginny.

Harry frowned. He didn't want to bother her with this but perhaps she might have a better idea. "Have you ever wondered if Dumbledore allows things to happen?"

"What kinds of things?" asked Ginny in confusion.

"Bad things... the kind of things that gives us nightmares afterwards," Harry didn't want to mention it by name, but Ginny understood.

"Are you asking me if I think Dumbledore allowed Tom to haunt me for so long and set a basilisk on students and nearly get me killed? And you?"

Harry nodded.

Ginny smiled at Harry indulgently. "I'm going to pull a Hermione on you."

"Huh?" asked Harry.

"Hogwarts: A History," said Ginny. "All professors have to swear an oath to never unlawfully hurt a student physically or sexually, or permit such a harm to occur to a student, to their direct or indirect knowledge, while they are in school grounds. Helga Hufflepuff was most insistent that this oath be set in stone. Lawful punishment was permitted but Headmaster Dippet made it strictly regulated half a century ago."

Harry looked at her quietly.

"No, Harry," said Ginny softly. "You cannot blame Dumbledore for any physical injury that has or may have happened to you. He may



have stood back while Tom messed with my mind, but his oath wouldn't have permitted him to let it continue the moment the basilisk was released. So no, he had no idea about the Chamber of Secrets affair. Or anything else."

"But how did Quirrel escape the oath?" Harry asked. "He tried to throw me off my broom from fifty feet high." He frowned. "Unless it wasn't Quirrel but Voldemort who was doing the incantation... and Lockhart only tried to erase Ron's memory, not physical injury... Snape has never touched me, in fact, he has often saved me from Slytherin attempts to send me to the medical wing..."

"Really?" Ginny was surprised. "Snape has saved you from Slytherins."

"And punished me for wasting his time, of course."

"That sounds more like him," Ginny agreed.

"I can't believe this..." Harry was flabbergasted. "Dumbledore completely messed with my head... made me believe he was responsible for all this..."

"And you believed it," Ginny pointed out.

Harry froze. "I told him I'd never trust him again, that I hated him." He lowered his head forwards and buried it in his hands, completely ashamed of himself. He felt Ginny's arms come around him. She patted his back gently.

Harry continued. "He was trying to make me stop trusting him, and I did. So easily."

"Harry," Ginny rested her face on his back. "I don't know what happened between the two of you in his office... but whatever he said to you, he decided to do so after your performance in the Second Task... think of that."

"What do you mean?"

"You should have seen his face," said Ginny, with admiration directed at Harry, "when you freed Susan but refused to leave the other three behind. People were confused, some were jeering, many

were angry that you would risk Hogwarts not winning... but Dumbledore was glowing with pride and had tears in his eyes."

"That's not helping," Harry told her.

"What I'm trying to say is that whatever happened between you was after Dumbledore decided you had the necessary moral fibre for it," said Ginny. "So don't be hard on yourself."

Harry considered her words. "You know, at this rate, I might hire you as my personal therapist."

"With the problems you have, it will have to be a fulltime commitment," Ginny shot back.

"Finish your assignment, Ginny," Harry told her, grinning lightly. "I'll see you tomorrow. And don't hesitate coming to me if you have any problems, in anything."

A few days later, Harry found himself and the other Champions being shown by Ludo Bagman to the maze where they would be doing their final task.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We seemly 'ave to get through the maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures... then there will be spells that must be broken... all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions will enter in the order of their points – Harry, Viktor, and then Cedric and Fleur together. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending on how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all.

"Very well... if you haven't got any questions? No, then perhaps you should get back to the castle... it's a bit chilly, isn't it?" Bagman

waited until the others started moving before nodding at Harry. "I believe Hagrid extended an invitation to you, Harry, for a cup of tea."

Harry slowly fell out of line and joined Bagman towards Hagrid's cottage.

"Now, Harry," said Bagman. "How's your preparation coming along?"

Harry nodded. "I took your advice and have learnt many spells from advanced Defence books. I can do the stunner, the blasting and exploding curses now."

"Good, good," said Bagman. He knocked on Hagrid's door. "Hagrid, it's Ludo and Harry. How about a cuppa', my dear fellow?"

Harry took this moment to evaluate Bagman. Ludo Bagman, one of the most popular and senior Ministry of Magic officials. He had taken a personal interest in Harry Potter since the beginning to the Tournament. But unlike all other Ministry officials, Bagman kept his friendship with Harry private, almost hidden. Why?

Harry had once considered that Bagman might have placed a bet on the outcomes of the various stages of the Tournament and that seemed more and more likely.

"Harry?" Hagrid was surprised to see him. "Come in. Come in, Ludo. It's cold out there." Hagrid put a kettle on his fire. "What brings you two here?"

"Oh, I was merely showing the Champions the maze," began Bagman, "and decided to bring young Harry for a tea and a chat."

"Ah. The maze," Hagrid grinned to himself. "The hippogriffs and blast-ended skrewts are coming along very well, Mr Bagman, sir. I wish Fluffy were still here... he would've loved to be part of this tournament."

"Fluffy?" Bagman was curious.

"Giant three-headed Cerberus," Harry supplied for Bagman's benefit. "I met him twice... in my first year. Lively fellow."

"Oh. That's nice to hear," said Bagman. A bead of perspiration appeared on his forehead, which given how cold it was outside, was rather surprising.

"I read your interview with that Skeeter woman," said Hagrid to Harry. "Sirius Black... I tell you... I believe it..." He became thoughtful. "I should have known... I saw Sirius that night and he was devastated... poor fellow... Azkaban's not a pretty place... Not pretty at all..."

Harry turned to Bagman. "Sir, is there any new word on the Blackgate scandal?"

Bagman shrugged. "I haven't been keeping myself updated at work. The Tournament is taking most of my time... and other private matters..."

"Oh."

"It would really please me to see you win the Tournament," said Bagman intently.

Harry measured him. "It's kind of hard to concentrate on the Final Task," he said slowly. "With all this chaos about Sirius Black..."

A look of panic crossed Bagman's face.

"Is there nothing you can do about it?" Harry asked.

"I..." Bagman hesitated. "You already have Amelia Bones doing everything in her power to find Black and give him a fair trial. What can I do?"

"I don't know," Harry shrugged. "I just get the feeling Minister Fudge isn't really concerned about making sure justice is done."

"Harry, I really believe you should leave this to the Ministry and focus on your final task," said Bagman. "How about this? I'll try to exert what influence I have in the Ministry on various people and make sure something is done."

"Really? That'll be great," said Harry.

"It's a pity Black is not in France, Italy or Germany. I could have easily secured him protection from the International Confederation. That might, in fact, be his best bet... if he is innocent, that is."

Harry was surprised to hear that, and shocked that Dumbledore, as the Supreme Mugwump of the Confederation, had not suggested something like that earlier. Was there another ulterior motive in that?

"Other than the spells you know," said Bagman, "these might be useful..."

"Ludo, are you helping Harry cheat?" Hagrid was shocked.

"No, of course not," Bagman shook his head indulgently. "These spells will be useful for Harry's OWL and NEWT exams and if he tries to seek employment as an Auror. Surely, you don't mind me giving our young friend a little tip to help him succeed in his life. Somebody has to do it, since James and Lily... you know..."

Hagrid's eyes misted. "That's mighty kind of you, Ludo. Always knew you had a good heart... I hope you work out your goblin debts soon and..."

"Yes, thank you, Hagrid!" Bagman interrupted swiftly.

A short while later, Harry left the cottage, pleased that he had guessed Bagman's motives accurately. He looked at the list of spells he had just received.

1. Confundo... confuses the target, works on humans and other creatures
2. Disillusionment charm... causes the target to become invisible until the charm runs out or the original caster ends it
3. Homorphus charm... causes transfigured or otherwise disguised or hidden human to revert
4. Locomotor... move objects at will
5. Switching spell

Harry was confused by this strange list, and realised that he already knew enough offensive spells. Bagman was just giving him a lot of ancillary magic to learn that might prove useful. That reminded Harry of what Cedric had said. Harry had a gift, he could learn powerful magic quickly, like the Patronus Charm in his third year.

He saw Susan sitting by herself in the Hufflepuff table for dinner and joined her.

"Hey," said Susan, moving her head towards him, and Harry happily gave her a quick peck on the lips.

To his surprise, Harry saw the other Hufflepuffs ignore them both. "What's wrong?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Somebody's been spreading rumours that I've been helping you all year by spying on Cedric," said Susan. "I've been isolated by most of the house."

"That's ridiculous," said Harry.

"Don't bother," said Susan, she sounded morose. "Justin and Hannah are the only ones still speaking to me... I can't believe Ernie... he called me a traitor and a shame to Hufflepuff loyalty..."

Harry wrapped an arm around her. "Let's leave the hall," he said, when he was receiving glares from those around him.

"Telling Potter what you spied on Cedric today, are you, traitor?"

Harry reached for his wand when he heard Zacharias' voice. Susan held his hand back, but Harry could see she was hurt by those sharp words.

"Ignore him," pleaded Susan. "Just take me somewhere quiet... I'll make it worth your while..."

Her offer made Harry lose all interest in facing Zacharias and he hastily led Susan out. On his way out, however, he saw a familiar face that gave him an inspirational idea.

"Over here, Peevsey!" Harry called out.

"Potty," the poltergeist bowed to him. "O, mighty dragonslayer, how may we mere ghosties be of service to thee?"

"Zacharias Smith." Harry pursed his lips, holding Susan's hand protectively. "He made my girlfriend upset. Peevsey, it is time for all noble men... and ghosts... to come to the aid of the party."

Peeves saluted solemnly.

"Can I trust you to handle things in this end, Peevsey?" Harry asked seriously.

"Aye, Potty, sir," said the poltergeist. "Peevsey will handle things. Flap, flap, flappity Zach..." He started laughing menacingly.

"Oh dear," whispered Susan, as they walked away, leaving the feared poltergeist to his schemes. "I kind of feel sorry for Zacharias now."

"Don't," said Harry. "He deserves this. Come to Gryffindor common room, people are okay with me these days over there."

"Kind of a reversal in fortunes since we last met in front of Peeves, isn't this?" Susan pointed out.

Harry's smile faded. "I'm sorry," he began. "You're facing all this because of our relationship."

"Yes, I know," said Susan, she sounded annoyed with his statement.

Harry paled. "Does this mean... you want to... reconsider... our relationship?"

Susan stepped in front of him. She was biting her lower lips and regarding him with narrowed eyes. "What a stupid thing to say when I'm already upset," she snapped at him. "If I do reconsider our relationship, it most certainly will not be because of what others want! Now, shut up, Potter, today is my turn to be insecure and your turn to console me."

"Err..."

"Tell me something sweet and nice!" Susan demanded.

"Err..."

"Make it poetic, if you can," she continued.

"Err..."

"Or, just hold me and play with my hair while I cry," said Susan.

"I can do that," said Harry, pulling her to him. He got a sudden idea, when Susan clutched him and wept quietly against his chest for a minute. Shuffling his body, so she wouldn't notice him remove his wand, he did a silent transfiguration on her hair clip. "Hey, there's something on your head."

"Huh?" Susan touched her hair, and giggled when a butterfly came to life and flew around her face. She pouted when the butterfly flew away after a couple of minutes. "Now, my hair's all loose."

"Yeah." Harry grinned. "I quite like it that way."

"Really?" Susan was thoughtful. "Just open and straight?"

"I always like your hair," Harry amended himself. "But I especially like it when strands fall in front of your face and you start twirling the ends when you're thinking."

"You've noticed?" Susan was surprised. "Aunt Amelia says it's a bad habit."

"It's cute," said Harry.

Susan blushed.

"Yeah, that's cute too," Harry agreed, really liking the red shades on her cheek.

"You're infuriating," Susan hit his chest lightly.

"But you still like me," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah, I do," she agreed. She let out a light laugh.

"So, do I pass today?" he asked.



"Hmm... acceptable," Susan tried to sound indifferent. "I didn't get that poetry, did I?" She giggled when Harry looked miffed, and grabbing his hand, starting running towards the grounds. "Let's go lie on the grass."

Notes:

Fanfiction has these fancy things to analyse the readers etc. For fun, I thought I'd point out the top locations of my readers. In order:

US  
UK  
Canada  
Germany  
India  
Australia  
Netherlands  
France  
Sweden  
Ireland

Unsurprisingly, a strong European and North American presence. Asia (India) and Australia are holding their own as well. Quite a global presence. Impressive.

Thanks for the reviews. I look forward to them and try to respond most reviews where interesting points are raised by the readers.

Looking at a next update by Sunday, hopefully. I am about 5k words into the next chapter (most of it was supposed to be here, but the length was getting ridiculous, and I decided to move it to the next chapter).

## Chapter 4

"So, what do you think?"

Harry saw his godfather regard him. The Final Task was only a few days away but Bagman had made good his claim, and Harry was trying to convince Sirius to leave the country.

"I don't like this," said Sirius. "I want to stay here... near you, even if I must remain in my canine form. At least, until the Tournament is over."

"Sirius, try to see reason!" Harry was frustrated. "I want you to be free, and this may be the only way to do it."

"I'm more use to you if I stay here," Sirius protested.

Harry frowned. "No. You are more use to me if you are able to clear your name and let me move in with you for the summer."

Sirius shook his head. "What makes you think the British Ministry will accept the International Confederation's reversal of verdict?"

"They'll have no choice," said Harry. "At the very least, you'll be a free man in France and I'll be able to stay with you there every summer."

"No," Sirius declared. "I'm staying here, and that's final."

Harry hesitated. Something Dumbledore had said came to his mind. Hating himself as he said this, he turned his eyes intently on Sirius. "What's your true reason for staying here?"

Sirius looked like he had been slapped. "I..."

"Tell me the truth," said Harry firmly.

"Fine." Sirius turned away from Harry. "It's Rosmerta, okay? She waited for me... and... you are correct... I shouldn't use you as an excuse... I'll take Buckbeak and go to France..."

Harry felt like something precious between him and Sirius had just snapped and it was his fault, but he was relieved with the results.

Sirius would fly to France where Bagman's contact will ensure him access to an ICW tribunal.

He returned to Hogwarts and nearly groaned when he saw the large group assembled near the maze.

"Harry, my boy."

"Minister," Harry greeted Cornelius Fudge, who rushed to Harry's side and shook his hand. "Director Bones." Harry noticed Fudge wasn't too pleased with his polite greeting to Amelia Bones, but looked pleased when Harry expressly ignored Amos Diggory. "It's a surprise to see you all here..." Harry's blood curdled slightly. "And Mr Malfoy."

"Oh, don't you worry about it," said Fudge, like an adult talking to a young child. "We're just here to make sure all the safety precautions are in place."

Somehow, knowing that Malfoy was supervising whether safety precautions were in place didn't quite make Harry very relieved.

"Have you heard from your godfather, Harry?" asked Fudge. "I was most appalled to learn what happened to him. I can assure you, Harry, Mr Black will receive a trial the moment he surrenders himself to Ministry custody."

Harry shrugged. "I haven't heard from him lately. He sent me a letter a while back from the Isle of Man, but I'm not sure if he's still there."

"Isle of Man," Fudge repeated contemplatively. "I'll have someone check that place. Thank you, Harry, my boy. Good luck for the final task."

The day of the final task was full of surprises for Harry. The Champions had their families invited for the event, and Dumbledore had seen fit to invite the Weasleys for Harry.

Harry couldn't help but consider all the ulterior motives Dumbledore might have had, but in the end, decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. He allowed Molly to fuss over him for a few minutes, thoroughly enjoying it, while Ginny was glaring at him enviously.

"Hi, mum," she said. "I'm here too... your only daughter..."

"Hello, sweetheart. There's something on your nose, dear," said Molly distractedly, before turning back to Harry.

After a few more minutes, Harry parted from Molly and walked towards a pouting Ginny and put an arm around her. "Mrs Weasley, is it okay if I leave my Firebolt with Ginny this summer? Ron's a shoe-in for Keeper, but we'll need a good Chaser too..."

"Of course, Harry," said Molly. "You'll take good care of Harry's broomstick, won't you, Ginny?"

Everyone except Molly caught the unintended double entendre and the good grace to look away from Ginny's reddening face.

"Molly... let's go and say hello to the Diggorys," Arthur hastily stepped in. "Bill... stay here."

Bill Weasley regarded his sister and her new best friend carefully.

"Oh, wipe that look off your face," Ginny snapped. "Harry and I aren't like that... He's with Susan... and I'm with Mr Cuddlebug."

"Mr Cuddlebug?" Bill asked curiously.

"That's the tortoise Ginny transfigured from her teapot," said Harry. "It's shell is oddly red in colour and it breathes out steam occasionally, but Mr Cuddlebug a fine specimen of the tortoise species."

Bill laughed. He looked at Ginny fondly. "Come here, Ginny," and he hugged her again. He patted her back, seemingly reading a lot more of her emotions than her parents could. "Harry, I was asked to relay a message to you from Charlie."

"Yeah?"

"He's moving from the Romanian reserve to a newly rebuilt reserve in Wales," said Bill. "He says you're welcome to join them for the summer."

Harry paused. "That's nice of him," he said slowly. "It'll be good publicity for the dragon reserve as well."

Ginny observed her brother's reaction to Harry's comment, and then sighed. "Bill, you can tell Harry outright if that's what Charlie wants. He won't mind, as long as you tell the truth. Don't treat him like a puppet."

"I'm sorry," Bill apologised. "I don't know Charlie's exact reasons, Harry, but your being there will definitely attract a lot more tourists and visitors than otherwise. It's fine if you don't want to come..."

"Hold your dragons just there!" Harry frowned. "I'd love to spend the summer with Charlie in a dragon reserve. Much better than the Dursleys."

"Can I also come?" asked Ginny excitedly. "Can I? Can I?"

"No, Ginny."

"Can I?"

"No..."

"Can I?"

"No!"

"Can I?"

"You're not going to stop, are you?" Bill asked morosely.

"Of course, not," said Ginny cheerfully. "Can I?"

"I'll talk to Charlie, dad and mum and try to convince them, chipmunk," Bill promised.

"Yay!"

Harry looked from brother to sister with amusement and mouthed 'chipmunk' but Ginny raised her fist at him menacingly so he decided to keep quiet. He had been slightly hurt when Bill tried to aid Charlie in using him like that, but he waved it aside. Everybody he knew,

other than his closest friends, would use him like that, he had to get used to it. More importantly, there was absolutely no reason for him to not use his public image to aid family. Because that's what the Weasleys were to him, despite his damaged friendship with Ron and the twins.

The Third Task was about to start.

Susan joined him before the start. "I'll be worried until I see you return in one piece," she whispered. "Please be safe."

Harry looked at her tenderly and pulled her into his embrace. "I enjoy our private times together far too much not to return in one piece."

"You're killing the mood," Susan said accusatorily. "This is supposed to be one of those wonderfully epic tearful farewells."

"There's nothing wonderful about seeing your tears," said Harry softly. He kissed her lips.

"My aunty is watching," said Susan, but she was smiling.

"Is she?" Harry didn't care. He brushed aside strands of her hair that were falling in front of her face. "She'll just have to turn the other cheek then." He leaned forward and kissed her again.

Soon, it was time to leave. Harry was the first to enter, as he had the most points from his earlier tasks. Bagman nodded at him and Harry stepped into the maze.

The first thing he did was rotate his wand and say, "Point me Triwizard Cup," while thinking of the trophy they had been shown earlier. The wand pointed the general direction he needed to follow. And he rushed through the maze. For several minutes, he encountered nothing more annoying than dead ends. But then he heard a hissing noise.

There was a snake in his path.

For a moment, Harry toyed with the idea of speaking to it, but then he recalled how the second task had large screen displays of how individual Champions performed, and he didn't want to remind

everyone of his Parseltongue. Killing it would be equally bad, showing a level of brutality nobody expected from the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Avis Oppugno," said Harry, conjuring several crows to attack the snake and keep it occupied, while he moved on.

Harry cast the Bluebells Flames when the sun disappeared and it became dark. The Bluebells hovered around his head, sending light and warmth, as he kept moving. Harry saw a strange creature next ahead of him.

He grinned to himself, wanting to try out something he had thought of elaborately.

"Geminio Sextus," he created six clones of himself, and sent them ahead, and then cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. He followed after the clones, trying to experiment whether the creature would leave him alone and go after the clones. The creature was a Sphinx and sniffed a few times before turning to the nearest clone and posed a riddle to it. Harry made use of the distraction to move ahead. As he was invisible, the sphinx wasn't able to see him. It sniffed a few more times but Harry's scent was masked by the six clones that were also around, and he reached safely to the other side.

Except, it was a dead end.

Harry groaned. "Reducto," he created a hole in the hedge. But it was covered fast enough. And suddenly, the solution was so clear to Harry that he wanted to slap himself for not thinking of it earlier.

"Wingardium Leviosa," he cast on his shoes. He slowly and carefully raised himself up and crossed through the hedges. He saw Hagrid's Blast-ended Skrewts in one direction and hippogriffs in the other. For a second, he toyed with the idea of flying on a hippogriff, but it was too dark and the maze wasn't big enough to warrant it. He could summon his broomstick, but then again, that was unnecessary as he could simply levitate himself.

He saw Moody, Snape and three others on brooms observing the maze from overhead, but ignoring them, he moved on, making sure not to raise himself so high that the other Champions would see him

and also decide to do the same. By doing so, he bypassed difficult challenges and took himself to compartments in the maze with no dangers, in order to relax for a moment, before casting the charm again and continuing on his way.

There it was.

The Triwizard Cup shimmered in front of him, a bright blue haze of light coming from the silver trophy. He had reached it before anyone else. He let out a laugh. He had proven to himself that he deserved to be a Champion. After all, the cup was his.

Harry rushed to it and grabbed it with his free hand.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling colours.

"Portkey," Harry spat out, after he had travelled hundreds of miles and found himself in a graveyard. Before anything could happen, he disillusioned himself and held his wand out in a defensive position. All the magic he had learnt would come useful in this unprecedented and potentially dangerous situation he found himself in.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, Harry saw someone coming. He watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily towards him between the graves. Harry couldn't make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And, several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time, Harry saw that the thing in the person's arms looked like a baby.

The figure stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second, Harry and the short figure simply looked at one another. And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was a familiar agony from his first year; and Harry held on to his wand dearly even as his knees buckled and he was on the ground. From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "He is here. Find him. Use lethal force if necessary. All I need is his blood."



"Yes, master."

Harry's stomach turned at the two voices. The second one was the easier to recognise. It was Wormtail, Peter Pettigrew, who had betrayed his parents. The other was a voice he had only heard in his nightmare before, a baby that Voldemort was possessing.

"I can't see him, master," Wormtail said. "He's not here."

"Fool. Potter is invisible. Cast Homenum Revelio."

Blood drained from Harry's face. He looked around him; there was nothing he could do, except, "Diffindo!"

"ARGH!"

Harry felt sickened when he saw the force of his curse sear seamlessly through Wormtail's wand arm, cutting it at the wrist. Wormtail dropped Voldemort-as-baby and sank to the ground.

Harry looked around. He was in a position of power, but with Voldemort in the equation, he was clearly outmatched. But still...

"Stupefy!" Harry stunned Wormtail. "Stupefy!" He tried stunning the baby, but a dark phantom left the body of the poor baby at the final moment.

"Potter!" the phantom screamed. "I will get you, if it is the last thing I do!"

Harry remained still. He didn't know if the phantom could see him, but he didn't want to make it easy for it.

"My servants will return to me and a new order will rise!" Voldemort screamed. "Already, my most faithful servant lies dormant within the safety of Hogwarts itself, and soon, Lord Voldemort will return. Everyone you care for... your family and friends... they will be destroyed!"

With that, the phantom flew away, abandoning Wormtail.

"Fantastic," muttered Harry to himself. "There's a spy inside Hogwarts."

Suddenly, something occurred to him. Draco Malfoy had warned him.

"My father's on edge. Professor Snape's on edge. Karkaroff's on edge."

What did that mean? Lucius Malfoy, Snape, Karkaroff. Were all three of them Death Eaters before? But why would they be on edge... unless... none of them particularly wanted Voldemort to return.

"Of course," muttered Harry. "All three are rich and influential right now, especially Malfoy and Karkaroff. They don't want to change that. But that doesn't mean they won't join him, if he does manage to come back." He observed the prone form of Wormtail in front of him and a smile came to his face. The Triwizard Cup lay by his feet, but Wormtail was by far the greater prize. Harry looked at his bleeding stump and reluctantly cast a healing charm to stop it. It wouldn't do for Wormtail to bleed to death, at least, not before a fair trial.

He shuddered at how close things had been. If he hadn't learnt all the magic he had that year, not only would Voldemort have returned using whatever means he had intended, but also Harry would be dead by now. He dragged Wormtail's body towards the Cup and grabbed the portkey again.

The pressure behind his navel was a clear indicator that the portkey was two-ways. Why would anyone make a two-way portkey when trying to abduct someone? 'What an idiot', was Harry's last thought, as he embarked on the return journey to Hogwarts, followed swiftly by, 'I need to learn how to make portkeys'.

"Harry!"

He couldn't tell who had screamed out. No sooner had he returned to Hogwarts that he was seized from all sides by his three favourite girls – Susan, Ginny and Hermione. Both Ginny and Hermione graciously let go of him while Susan clutched him. She was trembling and Harry wrapped his arms around her. He saw Dumbledore, Maxime, Karkaroff and Bagman rush towards him, Amelia Bones wasn't too far behind, coming with the Weasleys and Diggorys.

The maze had been vanished and the grounds were clear. There was complete silence despite the large audience and everyone was waiting to hear what happened in the final task.

"Headmaster, the trophy was a portkey," said Harry, aware of the attention he was receiving from everyone. "It was sabotaged by someone within Hogwarts. It took me to a cemetery where Peter Pettigrew," he kicked the stunned body lying nearby, "wanted to use me for some ritual."

Dumbledore regarded Harry for a moment. "Was there anyone else?"

Harry saw the eagle-hawk eyes of Cornelius Fudge, Amelia Bones and Amos Diggory on him. Voldemort was there, Harry screamed in his mind. But he hesitated. Always hesitate, he remembered Dumbledore's advice. How would the Ministry handle this piece of information?

"It's all a hazy memory," said Harry. "The moment I realised it was a portkey, I cast a disillusionment spell on me, disarmed Pettigrew before he could cast a killing curse, stunned him, and then returned with him."

"Disarmed?" Dumbledore repeated, looking at the stump that was once Pettigrew's right hand.

"Unconventionally," said Harry.

"You said there's someone in Hogwarts involved?" Dumbledore enquired.

Harry nodded. He had been thinking of that. "Despite my strong urge to point at some people," he looked apologetically at Snape, "track record and the curse of the Defence job must be taken account of..." He looked at Moody, who stepped backwards, his face showed his guilt.

"Severus, Igor," Dumbledore said urgently, and all three men sent stunners at Moody.

"This... this is Peter Pettigrew?" Fudge spluttered. "Impossible... clearly, the boy is deluded..." But his eyes flashed in recognition at Pettigrew. "We should have him Kissed at once!"

Harry hadn't noticed the change in the Minister's line of sight, and was confused. "Who me? I'm all game... Susan, you heard the Minister."

Susan blushed.

"Minister Fudge!" Amelia Bones stepped in, taking advantage of the miscommunication. "Surely, you didn't suggest that Harry Potter be Kissed by a Dementor!"

"What?" Fudge was perplexed. "But I..."

"Minister, I must protest at this gross abuse of power!" Diggory joined in, realising that his personal grudge against Harry Potter was immaterial now that he had won the tournament fair and square. "Aurors, I demand you to disregard all orders from Cornelius Fudge henceforth. He is clearly not in his right mind. Harry Potter is not to be touched."

"But..." Fudge spluttered.

"How dare you?" Amelia Bones regarded him furiously. "The boy just won glory for Hogwarts and Britain, and survived such terrible ordeals... How dare you suggest he should be Kissed by a Dementor?"

One of the Aurors coughed. "Perhaps Minister Fudge should be escorted back to his office," he said. "And given time to consider whether his attempted gross abuse of power merits an instant resignation."

"I'll leave you to it, Scrimgeour," said Amelia Bones.

Hyenas, that's what Harry thought they all were. Amelia Bones. Amos Diggory. That fellow Scrimgeour. He really wanted to step forward in Fudge's defence on seeing how stunned and lost he appeared. But a quick glance towards Dumbledore and he saw his the Headmaster shake his head in a small swift motion.

Harry kept his mouth shut.

"Amelia, Amos, I will trust you to look after things here," said Dumbledore. "Severus and Minerva will aid you. Olympe, Igor, may I impose on you to remain as impartial witnesses in case this needs to be taken up to the International Confederation."

"Of course!" Madam Maxime spat out. "I want to know what tortures could have potentially been done on my student."

"Harry, come with me, please," said Dumbledore. "Ah, your friends and families are welcome to join us as well."

Soon, Harry was in the medical wing, despite his many attempts to convince everyone he wasn't hurt.

"Honestly," Harry said, after stating the whole story. "I wasn't touched at all."

Dumbledore looked grave. "You handled it well," he praised. "Keeping out Voldemort's involvement. These are grave tidings. He is becoming more daring in his moves..."

"Harry," Susan whispered softly against him. "When everything quietens, I want you to explain very clearly what you meant when you said your scar hurt like it did in the first year with Quirrel."

Harry nodded.

"Harry!" Bagman burst through the door. "I heard... this is terrible... are you okay?"

Harry nodded.

"Good, good!" said Bagman, he sounded pleased. "Excellent work, my young friend! You are the Triwizard Champion!" He placed a bag of gold on his bed. "One thousand galleons. A nice haul. Thoroughly deserved, if I may say so. Excellent display of magic, and not least in returning from the unintentional trip to a Death Eater." He turned to Dumbledore. "They're saying Moody was under Polyjuice... Barty Crouch Jr."

Dumbledore turned ashen. "Arthur, Ludo, may I impose on you to stay with Harry until either I or Minerva return," and on getting the other man's nod, he left.

Harry observed the group in front of him. The entire Weasley family minus Charlie and Percy, Hermione, Neville, Susan and Ludo Bagman. To his surprise, Viktor Krum had also come in at some point and stood behind Hermione with his arms around her.

When Harry's eyes met his, the international Quidditch star shrugged. "Fair and square," Viktor admitted.

Harry forced himself not to look at Bagman, who had aided him throughout the tournament and reminded himself that Karkaroff probably did the same to Viktor.

"So, You Know Who is definitely alive?" Arthur said, he sounded disturbed and worried. "I had hoped... perhaps... Dumbledore was mistaken..."

"I wish I had a pensieve," said Harry. "I'd show you all my memory of what happened in the graveyard."

"That's actually... a very good suggestion," said Bagman. He looked longingly at the bag of gold. "I've got a pensieve as part of my family heirloom that isn't much used. I was planning to sell it in Knockturn Alley."

"For how much?" asked Harry curiously. He was glad when everyone else politely stepped away to let Harry and Bagman discuss the payment in privacy.

"You see, Harry... I..." Bagman sounded conflicted. "On one hand, I do want to give you a good deal, but on the other hand, I really need gold... Even after I clear my bets on the outcome of the Triwizard Tournament, I'm still two thousand galleons short of my debts... Not large enough for my debtors to resort to violence, but still enough to make life uncomfortable for me."

Harry frowned. He felt he owed something to Bagman, for not only helping him survive the Tournament, but indirectly equipping him to survive yet another encounter with Voldemort. Perhaps, the most convincing survival yet. Moreover, Harry actually felt confident. He

knew a lot more of magic than he had a few months back, and definitely, he was at par with OWL level students, if not NEWT, in some subjects.

"I think I can help," said Harry. "I'll buy your pensieve for two thousand galleons. A thousand here, up front... and the rest, during the summer."

Bagman looked at him with wide eyes that gleamed for a moment, but he forced himself to look away. "I don't know... you're a good kid, Harry... I don't know if I should..."

"I still need a pensieve," said Harry. "And my parents left plenty of gold for me that I can afford it."

Bagman grinned.

"Although, I'm not sure if Mrs Weasley will approve," he whispered. "Can we settle the full amount later?"

"Certainly," Bagman stepped aside. "Very well, Arthur, I'll fetch my pensieve for Harry. You'll stay here?"

"Of course," said Arthur Weasley, he was frowning. When Bagman left, he turned to Harry reproachfully. "You know of Bagman's track record in honouring his obligations..."

Harry nodded. "Which is why I've asked him to fetch the pensieve first."

"I hope he didn't overcharge you," said Arthur. "Pensieves are rare but due to their low demand, they aren't charged more than fifteen hundred galleons."

Harry shrugged.

Seeing that Harry didn't want to discuss it, Arthur dropped the topic. That was when Dumbledore entered the medical wing with McGonagall and Snape.

"I can't believe this!" McGonagall sounded like she had been repeating that statement a few times. "We've had that... that... thing

in close proximity with students all year... he hadn't even taken the oath."

"Yes, yes," said Dumbledore hastily. "We'll deal with that later. Harry, I trust you are feeling better now."

"Professor," said Harry seriously. "Since nobody is going to believe me that I wasn't hurt at all, I've asked Ludo Bagman to get his pensieve so I can show my memory of what happened to you all."

Dumbledore looked at Harry piercingly. "Who all would you like to view this memory?"

Harry shrugged. "Everyone in this room are welcome to see. Madam Bones, if she has time, and any Aurors."

Soon, everyone he had mentioned went inside the pensieve to see his memory, except Ginny, who decided to stay back.

"Come here," said Harry, seeing the fear in her eyes. Ginny scrambled to his side, and clutched his hand. "I won't let Riddle hurt you again," he promised.

"My hero," Ginny said lightly. She hesitated and touched his cheek, but instantly pulled back.

"He had plans to get his body back," said Harry gravely. "I'm glad I foiled him again. But Ginny, he's persistent. We have to prepare ourselves..."

Ginny nodded. "No more daydreaming in class," she promised.

"More," urged Harry. "The kind of research and preparation we've been doing for the Tournament... we shouldn't stop it."

"Besides, it's too much fun to stop anyway," Ginny agreed.

The others returned soon with very grave expressions. Amelia Bones was the first to make her opinion heard.

"For the interest of public order and security, this cannot be made public," she said. "But the DMLE and the Auror Department will be



placed in high alert. I... I'll leave now and send my people to do a perimeter scan of Little Hangleton."

Harry watched her leave. Bagman was the next to leave. Surreptitiously, he had picked up the bag of Harry's winnings and left in a rush. The Weasleys also left and the rest of his friends. Finally, it was just him and Susan.

"I really don't get it," Harry complained. "Why must I still spend the night in the medical wing?"

Susan regarded Harry for a few moments. Without responding to him, she turned to the medi-witch. "Madam Pomfrey, I feel rather faint..." She shuddered. "You Know Who is still alive... Harry nearly got hurt... and... and..."

"You're a terrible actor, Miss Bones," Pomfrey remarked. "But you can spend the night here as well. Under no circumstances is either of you to get on the other's bed or make any physical contact. The portrait of Sister Agnes will alert me to any such misconduct. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Susan.

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry added.

Susan grinned at Harry's happy expression when the two of them were left to themselves.

"Our first night together," Harry remarked.

Susan rolled her eyes. "No contact, remember..."

"Still... it's a special occasion," said Harry. "I'm sorry I made you worried."

"Not your fault," Susan said in a somewhat exasperated tone. "Honestly, if you're going to be all martyr-like and self-blaming, I'm just gonna leave."

"I promise I won't," Harry pleaded.

"Good boy." Susan looked at him with concern. "I wish..."

"What?" asked Harry, when she didn't finish.

"Nothing," she said. After a few moments, she looked at him desperately. "Harry, there's something I must tell you. Please don't be angry with me."

Harry frowned.

"I..."

"You did what, Susan?" asked Harry quietly.

"I..."

"You cheated on me with Zacharias Smith?"

"What?" Susan yelled. "No! How could you even think..." she saw Harry smirk. "You..." She threw a pillow at him.

"What's bothering you?" asked Harry, hugging the pillow she threw at him.

Susan looked at him affectionately. "One of the reasons I agreed to go to the Yule Ball with you was because my aunt had told me to try and be friends with you."

Harry looked at her with a blank expression.

"Please, Harry, please believe me," Susan begged. "That the more time I spent with you, the more I got to know you... even before the Ball I was beginning to like you a lot... I didn't know Aunt Amelia was coming to the Ball and I hated how our coming together was a political statement you hadn't wanted to make... so I've said no to all of my aunt's attempts since then... Harry, I really like you, and I'm sorry..."

"You used me," said Harry.

Susan looked away. "Only until the Ball," she sounded desperate. "Since then, I've been sincere. Please give me a second chance."

"You used me," Harry repeated, in a daze. "Goodnight, Susan." He tossed her pillow back to her bed and lay down, turning to his side, away from Susan.

Dumbledore had tried to warn him of this, he couldn't trust anyone. He tried drowning out the sound of her tears, and kept telling himself it didn't bother him, for the rest of the night.

The next morning Harry woke up and saw Susan was already awake and looking terrible. He wasn't sure how much sleep she had managed to get.

"Does this mean..." her voice was filled with dread. "Does this mean we're over?"

Harry felt his heart lurch at her words. Part of him wanted to grab her in his arms and kick himself for making her cry, but another part of him wanted to just leave before she could hurt him more.

"Why did you tell me all this now?" asked Harry.

"My aunt wanted me to invite you to our place for the summer and make sure people saw you with her," said Susan. "I couldn't do that."

Harry walked towards her and took her fingers in his hand. "I need to think," he said truthfully. "We leave for vacation today. I want us to take a break until term starts and then I'll give you an answer."

Susan looked at him hopefully. "Can I... Can I stay in touch through post?"

Harry didn't think that was a good idea, but he couldn't help himself. He nodded. But he swiftly left the medical-wing and returned to his dorm. He sat on his bed, without caring about packing. He was staring into space.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

To his surprise, it was Ron who asked him that. Neville wasn't in, nor were Seamus or Dean. And although Harry and Ron hadn't had any heart-to-heart chats since Halloween, he turned to his former best friend.

"I think I just broke up with Susan," said Harry slowly.

"What?" Ron joined him and sat down on his bed. "Why?"

"Long story," said Harry, shaking his head. "She... betrayed my trust. I've had my fair share of that this year."

Ron averted his gaze, feeling the sting in that phrase. "I don't know what to say," he said after a while. "But something Hermione told me comes to mind."

Harry waited for him to continue.

"You hold people to a ridiculously high standard," said Ron, and Harry frowned. "You also make those close to you want to reach that high standard and improve themselves. But it isn't until they've failed once that they realise that."

Harry remained silent for a while. "Neville and Ginny haven't failed yet."

"Yeah, well," Ron shrugged. "Ginny's special."

Harry couldn't deny that. "Thanks, Ron. I'll keep this in mind."

Summer vacation started in its usual unfriendly theme for Harry. The Dursleys didn't want him, the Dursleys didn't like him, the Dursleys didn't acknowledge him. On a whole, that was an improvement. Having a supposedly lunatic mass-murderer godfather helped in that. He cherished the first letter he received from Sirius when he reached France.

Dear Harry

I apologise for the manner in which we parted. You were right, of course, and I acknowledge that completely. I was blinded and acting irrationally. James and I were never the sensible ones, I'm glad you take more after Lily. But can I plead Azkaban and exposure to Dementors as an excuse?

Your friend Bagman's contact has met me and I will be heard in a special tribunal of the International Confederation for my breach of

Confederation Right 6, right to fair trial, next week. Until then, the beaches of South France – divine, I tell you! And the babes...

I heard you won the Tournament! Congratulations, Harry, I knew you had it in you. Lily and James would have been proud of you, as much as I am right now, perhaps more, but I fail to see how more pride than what I feel could be possible. I also heard of your encounter with Wormtail. On one hand, I wish I was there. I would have loved to be locked in a room with Wormy for a night. But perhaps, all things considered, this is the better alternative.

Kiddo, take some time off and enjoy yourself this summer. I saw how unhappy you were with Petunia, so I'm going to urge you to accept any invitations from your friends, Ginny, Neville, Hermione and Susan, and spend some time having fun this summer.

Your loving godfather

Sirius.

Harry was waiting eagerly for the second week of the summer. When it arrived, he answered every doorbell promptly, wishing to see...

"Charlie!" Harry greeted happily. "I'm glad to see you!" He shook hands with the well-built dragon handler.

"And what about me?" Ginny pouted.

Harry blinked. "Hello, little girl. Do I know you?" he asked Ginny.

"Prat." Ginny stepped forward and hugged him.

Harry held her for a long moment. He felt the Dursleys looking at him from behind, and Dudley was ogling at Ginny, something that sickened Harry.

"What is this?" Uncle Vernon asked. "You didn't tell us anything about more freaks visiting us."

Harry's eyes flashed. "They're not freaks, Uncle Vernon," he said with gritted teeth, but Ginny held his hand to calm him down.

"Harry is coming with us to work this summer in my... uh... firm," said Charlie, acting like a proper adult. "We will not take much of your time. Harry, have you packed your things?"

Harry nodded. He rushed upstairs to get his trunk down. When he came down, he saw a strange sight. Both Charlie and Ginny were staring at the Dursleys with incredulity.

"What?" asked Harry, as he came down.

"Boy, they say you won some tournament thingummy in your school and got money?" asked Vernon. There was an unmistakable hint of greed in his eyes.

"It's all spent," Harry shrugged. "I had to buy some things... magical things. You know, to help me this summer working in Charlie's dragon reserve." He quickly left before they could respond to him.

"I can't believe them!" Ginny was furious. "How can they not be proud of you?"

"Sirius is," said Harry cheerfully, before realising that Charlie wasn't supposed to know of the big secret.

"I see," said Charlie. "So Ron was telling the truth about the whole Black-Pettigrew-Scabbers story?"

"Well, I'm not sure what Ron told you but there is a story involving those three," Harry nodded.

"Harry, thank you for coming with us," said Charlie. "But I must admit there was another reason for my offer, other than what you and Ginny believe."

Harry looked at him curiously.

"Basically, we're trying to snatch you," said Charlie, with a grin, "in the hope that you'll enjoy your time with us this summer so much that you'll want to work with us full time after graduation."

Harry was surprised. "You want me... a mere fifteen year old... to work full time in a dragon reserve?"

"Mate," Charlie looked at him intently. "You singlehandedly took care of a Hungarian Horntail. I can say without any hesitation that I know only three others with that on their CV. And none of them is within a couple of decades of your age."

Harry blushed. "She was just a little dragon."

Charlie chuckled.

"You've been spending an unnatural amount of time with Hagrid!" Ginny declared.

"Now, Ginny Weasleys..." Harry shuddered. "Those are dangerous creatures."

Ginny's fist came in front of his face.

"See!"

"So, what's going on between you two?" asked Charlie directly. "Bill told me to tread with care in this issue... and well, subtlety isn't particularly my forte... so what's going on?"

"I'm gonna kill Bill," Ginny muttered. She shook her head. "We're good friends, just that. Harry's with Susan and..."

Harry cut in, "Didn't Ron tell you?" he sounded slightly flustered. "I broke up with Susan on the last day."

"What?" Ginny demanded. "Why?"

Harry looked uncomfortable. "Can we talk later?"

"Meaning, can we talk when big brother Charlie isn't around," Charlie reinterpreted.

Ginny looked at Harry with concern, but there was an odd gleam of hope in her eyes.

Soon, they were in the dragon reserve. Harry saw with wonder at all that was happening over there. To his surprise, the reserve was just vast areas of the ordinary countryside with wards preventing non

dragon tamers from coming in and wards preventing dragons from going out. But the area itself was vast.

"It's intended to keep the dragons free and in their natural habitat," said Charlie. "It's not a zoo."

Harry saw two Welsh Greens flap their wings lazily as they descended to a stream to drink some water.

"The Welsh Greens usually prefer to live in mountains," said Charlie. "But Septimus and Octavia often join us down here."

"How many dragons are there in this reserve?" asked Harry.

"Twelve, currently," said Charlie. "The capacity of this reserve is fourteen adults, and we will be acquiring a new one during your stay here. That is always exciting, the only thing more exciting than acquiring a new dragon is to witness the birth of one."

"What do they eat?" asked Harry.

"We have an Antipodean Opaleye from New Zealand. She only eats sheep, grass and leaves," said Charlie. "The nine Welsh Greens we have hunt birds and small mammals and usually avoid human company, except for..."

"Septimus and Octavia," said Ginny. "I like their names."

Charlie grinned. "The Vipertooth are the deadliest ones. They are the smallest of the lot but they love big cattle, cows and an occasional human."

"Humans?" Ginny's eyes widened. "Like us? They like to eat us?"

Charlie nodded. "Which is why the two of you will not be allowed to wander on your own while within the perimeter of the reserve. Is that understood?"

Both nodded.

"Dragons are fascinating creatures," said Charlie. "There's a lot you can learn from them. But I doubt you'll be doing any real dragonology in your brief stay with us."



"Then what will we be doing?"

"And don't say cleaning dragon dung!" Ginny sounded worried. "I've heard enough of that from the twins."

"Dragon dung is an excellent source of minerals for the soil and doesn't stink much," said Charlie. "Unless someone has specifically ordered a batch of it, we just leave it lying." He shook his head. "You, Harry, will work with the team that handles the acquisition of the new dragon. I daresay you'll enjoy your stint there."

"You're separating us?" asked Ginny, sounding annoyed.

"Only for the first week or thereabouts," said Charlie. "You, my dear sister, will join the other new recruits in their training, to learn a few spells that Harry already knows. It's to ensure you can keep yourself safe."

Ginny grudgingly accepted that.

"When you're done," said Charlie excitedly, "we'll go on an adventure trek up the mountains to the enclosure where the Welsh Greens keep their eggs to check if any is about to hatch."

"Yeah, well, that's all fine and good." Harry sounded confused. "But nobody's mentioned anything about riding a dragon yet! Isn't that the whole point of being around them?"

Charlie laughed nonstop for the next five minutes.

Harry realised that wasn't the point at all about a dragon reserve, and wizards did not ride dragons. Period. But Charlie was correct; he enjoyed the new acquisition tremendously. Charlie had failed to mention that the new dragon they were obtaining was Norberta the Norwegian Ridgeback. And Norberta seemed to remember him.

At first the four dragon handlers were shocked by the sudden energy shown by the lethargic Ridgeback.

Ian, Kenneth, Janna and Gavril were with him. Ian and Kenneth worked with Charlie in the reserve, whereas Janna and Gavril had brought the Norwegian Ridgeback from the Romanian dragon facility

and were staying for a few weeks. All four were ready to stun the dragon, when they realised that instead of fire it was only sending repeated puffs of smoke at Harry while making strange shrill noises.

Janna was the first to realise it. She burst out laughing, and pushed a tentative Harry Potter towards the dragon.

"Are you trying to kill me, woman?" Harry accused her, when Norberta started licking his face.

"Ridgebacks are the most social dragons," said Ian. "And although Norberta is a female and much more violent than the male Ridgebacks, she has identified you."

"Identified me?" Harry was confused. "As what?"

"Her mommy."

All four of them burst out laughing. Harry didn't find it funny. He was scared he'd be mauled to death by a fire-breathing monster but after the first few seconds, he raised his hand and touched Norberta's head.

"Wow," he declared afterwards. "That was such a surreal experience. Norberta is such a softie."

Charlie and Ginny observed him with awe. "The only dragon I've touched in a non-combat situation is Septimus, and that too when he was asleep and Octavia was on a hunt."

"I wish I'd seen that," Ginny sounded disappointed.

"You still can," said Harry. "I have my pensieve with me." He took the two Weasleys with him to see his memory of playing with Norberta.

"You are insane, Harry Potter!" Ginny looked very pale at what she was seeing.

Harry put an arm around her. "Don't worry," he said softly. "I'll introduce you to her soon. Then you can play with her too. I'm sure she'll give you a very warm welcome."

Ginny wasn't amused.

During the rest of the time, tourism did surge tremendously, and most people paid a good five galleon fee to take pictures of Harry Potter with a Norwegian Ridgeback, which he gladly signed for all young children. Harry hadn't overcome his aversion to his fame, but at least, now he felt he deserved some of it. He had become Triwizard Tournament Champion and more importantly was a trainee dragon handler.

The day came when Ginny finally mastered the Flame-Freezing Charm, the Conjunctivitis Curse and a low intensity ward to keep dragons away, and Charlie decided to take them, along with Kenneth and Janna on a trek to see the eggs.

Harry was excited.

"So," Ginny began in a low voice, they had fallen into line a few paces behind the others. "About Susan."

Harry fidgeted. He had been trying to keep Susan out of his mind, and it had been working quite well. But Ginny's raising of the topic brought it back. He had received a letter from her a few days back while but he had been kept busy enough with Norberta not to dwell on it for long. It had been short and altogether too formal for his liking, but it was best that way.

Dear Harry

I hope you are well. I had a fight with my aunt and am writing to let you know that I will never repeat this mistake again. I won't try to put any pressure on you and this is the only time I'll refer to it until we meet again.

I read in the newspaper that you are working in the Welsh dragon reserve this summer and I hope you enjoy it. Please send me pictures of nice dragons, if you have time.

Love

Susan

Harry shrugged when he saw Ginny was still waiting for his response. "It was all a lie," he said. "She'd been trying to become friends with me because her aunt wanted to be seen with me in public."

Ginny gasped.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," said Harry.

Ginny nodded mutely and slipped her fingers in his hand. "I'm here for you, Harry, if you need a shoulder to cry on," she said seriously.

"So you can tease me for the rest of my life?" Harry shot back.

"Darn! Foiled!" Ginny cursed.

Harry chuckled, gripping her hand firmly. "Neville's coming to visit the reserve tomorrow."

Ginny grinned. "That'll be nice." Before she could say anything, the others in front of them stopped.

"Shh." Charlie said. "Come here softly."

Harry and Ginny walked closer to them, to the edge of the cliff, and gasped in wonder. Half a dozen Welsh Greens were flying in the green valley beyond. In one corner were dozens of large dragon eggs. But it was the flight of the dragons that enraptured both the young teenagers.

"That's so beautiful," said Ginny.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this," said Harry. "I wish Colin was here with his camera."

Ginny clucked her teeth. "One of the others in the camp must have a camera. Just take a picture from your pensieve, Harry."

"That works?" Harry was surprised.

Charlie nodded. "The edges leave a faint silver glow, to show that the picture was taken from a memory, but if you choose a suitable picture frame, there's no way to distinguish it."

"Cool. Susan will love this." Harry kept looking at the flying dragons, vowing to take a picture of it and send it to Susan. He felt a slight constriction in his chest on recalling their fight, and turned away.

"Harry," Ginny was looking at him with an unreadable expression. "Harry, look at me."

Harry didn't move.

"Harry, don't make this any harder than it already is for me," Ginny sounded desperate. Harry reluctantly raised his head. "She cares for you."

"I know," Harry admitted.

"Then, you're being stupid," said Ginny irritably. "So what if she wanted to be friends with you because of your fame? How can you ever escape that? How can you run away from this big red arrow that points to your scar and says, Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry remained silent.

"It's whether she cares for you now that you should consider," said Ginny. "And whether you care for her."

Harry closed his eyes, and felt Ginny's arms come around him.

"Do you?" Ginny asked quietly. "Do you care for her?"

"A lot," Harry admitted. "It hurts. But it also hurts knowing I cannot trust her."

"You're being silly again," said Ginny, as she blinked back tears of her own. "Susan told you everything, didn't she, before anything else happened? Of course you can trust her."

"My aunt wanted me to invite you to our place for the summer and make sure people saw you with her. I couldn't do that."

"True," said Harry. "You want me to give her a second chance?" asked Harry quietly.

Ginny looked at Harry with an annoyed expression. "No. I don't want you to give her a second chance... I don't want you to look at her or even think of her... I want you all to myself... but if you turn away from her now, you'll be miserable... and I don't want that either..."

"Ginny," Harry began softly.

"Don't, Harry," she said warningly. "Just don't."

Harry remained silent. He didn't know what to say to her anyway.

"Some damsel in distress I am, huh?" Ginny replied after a few moments. They were still holding hands and looking at the dragons. Charlie and his friends had moved away tactfully, giving the two of them their privacy. "Can't even keep my knight away from other girls."

"You think you're not important to me?" Harry said softly.

Ginny turned to him with an unreadable expression. "I'm your best friend, silly, and that makes me very special. But I can tell I'm not Susan."

Once again, Harry was left at a loss.

"Did you hear?" Ginny suddenly said in a chirpier voice. "Hermione's gone to Bulgaria."

"To visit Viktor," Harry nodded. A small grin came on his face. "He is really serious about her."

"I'm not so sure of Hermione, though," said Ginny. "Last I spoke to her, she said she's too young to be in a serious committed relationship, which is what Viktor is looking for."

And so the topic was changed.

A couple of nights later, Harry wrote a letter in response to Susan's.

Dear Susan

I'm sorry to hear of your fight with your aunt; I hope you mend things soon. The dragon reserve is very nice, and I'm sending you some pictures.

The first one is of me with a Norwegian Ridgeback. No, she is not biting my hand off, just licking my fingers. She's just an overgrown puppy, that's all.

The second one is of me and Ginny watching the dragons fly. That was a beautiful thing to see, and we both talked of many things, including you. Ginny's drilling some sense into my thick head.

The third one is of me, Neville and Ginny; and the two Welsh Greens in the background are Septimus and Octavia. They're very shy, those two dragons, but they don't mind Ginny or Charlie's company as much as others. Must be some Weasley thing.

Is that invitation to visit you still open? I'll be leaving the dragon reserve on August 12, and would like to spend some time with you. If that's a problem, I'll stay with Neville and help him with his new greenhouse.

Love

Harry

He got a response back just a few hours later, shortly after midnight.

Harry, it's not a problem at all! I'll write again in the morning! Thank you!

Love

Susan

He grinned when he saw the scrawled handwriting as if it had been scribbled very fast. He turned to the picture of Susan he had taken from his pensieve and looked at her fondly. Things would get better. He was completely oblivious to Ginny crying in her tent a few feet away, being held by Janna from the dragon reserve in Romania.

## Chapter 5

### 'Blackgate Scandal: International Confederation Condemns British Justice

By Andy Smudgley

In a shocking turn of events, a special tribunal of the International Confederation of Wizards convened in Paris, consisting of a full bench with representatives from nine countries, when notorious prisoner of Azkaban Sirius Black remanded himself to their custody. His case was heard by the tribunal consisting of eminent judges including Perenelle Flamel. They returned a verdict of innocent on all counts and they further returned a declaration that the Wizengamot of the United Kingdom breached Mr Black's fundamental human rights.

The truth, as revealed under truth potion, is that Mr Black was not the person who betrayed the Potters on Halloween, 1981. Nor had he murdered Peter Pettigrew or the muggles in the incident following shortly after. Nor had he received a trial before being sent to Azkaban for life.

A verdict from the ICW is not binding upon our Ministry or Wizengamot, and Mr Black is still a felon at large under our laws. This diplomatic shame for our country has only been exacerbated when Mr Black revealed his reasons for not surrendering to British Aurors on being assured of a trial: "I was afraid... they would stage an accident to remove the complication my life brings to the 'good name' of the Ministry."

Incidentally, Peter Pettigrew was discovered alive at the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament, where he attempted to murder Harry Potter. It is believed that Minister Fudge has been keeping these developments quiet until after the elections to avoid any repercussions on his votes.

"Minister Fudge is losing control of his faculties," Rufus Scrimgeour was quoted as saying. "I had to restrain him personally from making an attack on the person of the Boy-Who-Lived. How can we allow such a madman to remain in control of our government?"



Rufus Scrimgeour has vowed to run in the elections against Cornelius Fudge and bring back justice and dignity to our government. Running against Fudge, will also be Amos Diggory and Amelia Bones.

None of the others were available for comment.'

Harry read the article with interest. He hadn't been keeping himself updated while he was in the dragon reserve but now that he was back in civilization, he was getting back on track. There was very little mention of what happened in the final task of the tournament after he vanished, but that was merely to prevent widespread panic. Moreover, the reporter seemed to subtly favour Rufus Scrimgeour for the elections than the other two.

"Harry, it's good to see you."

Harry smiled at Ludo Bagman. He had scheduled a meeting with Bagman and Charlie had dropped him in the Ministry of Magic. Harry had been waiting for Bagman to conclude his previous meeting, and was nearly surprised to see another familiar face.

"Oliver?" Harry was surprised.

Oliver Wood grinned at his former Quidditch teammate. "I got selected!" he said excitedly. "Puddlemere United's new Keeper!"

"Congrats," said Harry, shaking hands with Wood.

"I was merely informing Oliver of his strong chances of joining the England team as Keeper for the next World Cup," said Bagman. "Old Kennedy wants to give up an active life and retire to his country home and start a runespoor farm."

"Really," Harry was surprised. "That's great news. You'll be great, Oliver."

"Anyway," Bagman led Harry inside. "How can I help you?"

Harry looked at the office with interest. It wasn't huge but it was comfortable and had posters of Quidditch teams and other memorabilia.

"I need some advice," said Harry, "and you're best placed to give it to me."

"Go on."

"I have tried hard to keep myself out of it," said Harry, "but I guess I can't really change the fact that everything I do this summer will have a strong impact on the ministerial elections."

Bagman chuckled. "The Boy-Who-Lived and Triwizard Champion, who's been dancing with dragons for the past month... The Daily Prophet is all over you, Harry."

Harry blushed. "I want to know more about the candidates for the ministerial election... I'll be going to Susan's place later today and staying with her until school starts."

Bagman frowned. "Amelia has surprisingly kept that very quiet. I would have expected her to blow trumpets about your visit."

Harry grinned. "I think Susan had something to do with that."

Bagman leaned back thoughtfully. "For starters, Fudge is a goner. He's a landmine. Scrimgeour is a tough wizard. He'll whip the Ministry into shape but his enforcement will be rather draconian."

"Is he corrupt?" asked Harry.

Bagman laughed. "We're politicians, Harry. Every single one of us is corrupt in some way or other. You don't survive this game without some vices. Scrimgeour is... different from Fudge. He will not take bribes from people such as Malfoy and Rosier. He will fall on them like a tonne of bricks the moment they step one toe out of line."

"That's good," said Harry.

Bagman shook his head. "He's not much different from Crouch, this Scrimgeour."

Harry frowned. "You mean..."

"He is controlling and will expect everyone to dance to his tune... or else..."

"What about Amelia Bones?"

Bagman shrugged. "She's not a bad choice, truly. Many people discount her as a weak figure due to her not standing up against Fudge more often, but those who know her respect her strong sense of duty. Every Director has a duty to the Minister and Amelia Bones' lack of opposition is not an indicator of weakness or absence of values but a strong adherence towards her responsibility to the Fudge administration, despite her personal views."

"You think I should support her?" asked Harry.

"Her or Diggory," said Bagman. "I know you had some problems with Amos, but he's a good man, perhaps exactly what this Ministry needs. An efficient administrator with strong ethical values."

"You said everyone is corrupt," Harry pointed out. "What are Amelia Bones and Amos Diggory's corruption?"

Bagman chuckled again. "Amos is a tad discriminatory towards all non-humans. It will be easy to convince him of the merits of anti-house elf and anti-goblin legislations. You understand what I mean?"

Harry frowned. "That someone can bribe him in those areas because he himself wants to do it?"

"What a shocking conclusion, Harry!" said Bagman. "You didn't hear me say that, did you?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, but then he grinned. "Of course not, Mr Bagman. I apologise, I misspoke."

"Amelia is a strong proponent of the feminist movement. She will make many measures of positive discrimination that may be somewhat excessive."

"Still... that doesn't sound as bad as anti-muggle or anti-werewolf laws," said Harry.

"Imagine this." Ludo Bagman said. "There comes a new rule that one in every two Auror must be a witch; and the Auror intake each

year is only about six. How many capable wizards will the Auror Department lose out on while making this accommodation? Positive discrimination, in the end, is still a discrimination that affects a proper meritocratic system. But I suppose she and Amos are still the lesser of other evils."

"Why aren't you running?" asked Harry curiously. "You are very popular, especially after commentating in the world cup final, and hosting the Triwizard Tournament."

"Harry, Harry," Bagman shook his head. "I quite like where I am. I get to see Quidditch and meet important people – politicians and celebrities, in both the magical and the muggle world..." He grinned to himself. "And supermodels, lots of supermodels. I get prestige, fame and power in ample amounts where I am. Oh, and a lot less paperwork. I just hope whoever wins doesn't replace me with someone else."

With those words, Harry left the Director of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, taking the floo to the address Susan had given him.

He took a deep breath when he saw Susan in front of him. She looked beautiful, and he could tell she had spent a lot of time getting ready for his visit. Part of him wanted to grab her in his arms.

"Hello," he said weakly.

"Harry," Susan looked conflicted.

"I uh... I mean, you look... uh... very nice..."

Susan giggled.

Harry smiled when he heard her laugh and opened his arms in invitation; Susan didn't think twice before jumping on him. The moment she fell against him, Harry felt a deep rumble in his chest and placed his arms around her protectively.

"Does this mean... does this mean we're good?" asked Susan, hesitating.

"Good?" Harry responded, sounding disappointed. "I was rather hoping we'd be naughty instead..."

Susan looked up at him with a cute smile. "I think I can handle naughty." Without any warning, she pinched Harry's bum.

"Hey!" Harry protested, returning the favour.

"Ahem."

"Hannah," Harry looked at Susan's friend in surprise.

"I thought maybe you'd feel more comfortable with someone else also here today," Susan didn't look at him directly.

"But clearly you were wrong," Hannah replied sharply. "I think I'll leave, Susan. Neville invited me to see his new greenhouse."

"Bye, Hannah," said Harry, before Susan could protest.

Hannah chuckled as she left through the floo.

"I'll uh... show you to your room," said Susan.

Harry followed her. He realised this was the Bones family house and wasn't surprised to see it as large as an affluent pureblood family should have.

"My room is there," said Susan, she pointed to a door just down the corridor. "This is the second nicest guest room. The nicest one is in the ground floor if you'd prefer that but it's a long walk and..."

"Susan, this is fine," Harry said, seeing the large and comfortable room. "This is way better than what I had with the Dursleys." He left his trunk.

"How upset are you still with me?" asked Susan, without beating around the bush any longer.

Harry paused for a moment. "Before I answer that, will you explain something to me honestly?"

Susan nodded.

"I was seeing memories of our times together in my pensieve," said Harry, and Susan looked away. "The Ball. We were dancing and I apologised about drawing conversation about politics, and you looked troubled. You took us out to the courtyard for fresh air."

Susan nodded. "That was when my guilt became intolerable," she admitted. "I was enjoying our time so much... I couldn't let you stay there for my aunt to push any further agenda."

"You challenged your aunt twice," said Harry, taking her hand. "You snapped at her angrily."

"I was furious with her," Susan looked close to tears. "I was furious with her for putting me in such a position, and furious with myself for doing it."

"I thought so," Harry wrapped his arms around her. "What about now? Why do you want to be with me now?"

Susan looked at him desperately. "You need to ask?" she sounded sad.

"You've given me reason to doubt," Harry pointed out logically.

Susan looked troubled. "I can't completely fix this, can I?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe in time."

"I couldn't continue on the foundation of deception, that's why I had to tell you, because I thought I was beginning to feel something a whole lot deeper for you."

"Was?"

"I used past tense because I no longer think," she said. "I know now."

"How do you expect me to stay upset with you when you say things like that, hmm?" said Harry fondly.

Susan looked at him hopefully.

"It's all Ginny's fault," Harry muttered. "Everything was easy just to blame you... but then she had the bright idea to tell me to consider whether you care for me now, and whether I do the same for you..."

"I'm going to get her something very nice for Christmas," vowed Susan. She looked slightly troubled. "It can't have been easy for her."

"You have no idea," Harry looked guilty. "I felt like I deserved being ripped apart by dragons when I saw her face the next morning."

Susan didn't reply for a while. "She's an amazing person."

Harry nodded. "She's gone with this woman we met in the reserve to Romania for the rest of the holidays."

"Oh?"

"A gypsy witch called Janna," said Harry. "So, what have you planned for the rest of the holidays?"

"I uh..." Susan began. "I wasn't sure what you'd want to do..."

"I have a few ideas," said Harry, grabbing her arms, and lowering her to the bed, as he reached for her lips.

Before they realised it, it was dinner time, and Amelia Bones had returned from work. The three of them were sitting around the dining table, although there was a strained silence.

"Judging by how your hands are joined beneath the table," said Amelia sharply, "I'll hazard a guess that you've worked out your differences."

"Yes," Susan replied, with a hint of coldness.

Harry squeezed her hand comfortingly.

Amelia sighed. "I suppose an apology is in order."

Harry turned slightly red. "It's fine. I uh... don't mind expressing my support for you in public but I would prefer you to ask me directly in the future."

Both Amelia and Susan looked surprised at his statement.

"Are you serious, Mr Potter?" asked Amelia in amazement.

Harry shrugged. "I spoke to Ludo Bagman and I get the opinion you'd make a better Minister than the other candidates."

"Ludo said that?" Amelia was surprised.

Harry didn't pursue that line. But from the look on Amelia Bones' face, he was sure there was one potential Minister who wouldn't replace Ludo Bagman from his comfortable position.

"The popular writer and dragonologist Ian Hathaway recently published a new non-fictional book on dragons," said Harry. "There's a public signing this Saturday, and this new book has pictures of me with a Norwegian Ridgeback, which I've been asked to sign. That may be a good occasion for a public show of support."

Amelia Bones considered Harry for several moments. "Are you perhaps considering a career in politics?"

Harry shuddered. "No," he declared. "Personally, I wouldn't mind going back to the dragon reserve after Hogwarts, or something completely different and totally unrelated to politics... but I need to learn how to handle politics just enough to survive this big red arrow that points to my scar that everyone but I can see."

Amelia blushed, and Susan stared at her plate quietly.

"It was very funny when the director of the reserve said they were headhunting me," said Harry, trying to change topics. "Took them quite a while to find me from my hiding place and explain that the dragons would not be taking part in the 'hunt'."

Amelia laughed.

"Has the Auror Department found anything from that night?"

Amelia looked slightly troubled at his question. "We have," she said. "It is most disturbing. There was a cauldron and various ingredients for a dark ritual. The exact nature of this ritual is unknown, but it is to



do with necromancy. The place where you were taken to was a graveyard in the village where the Gaunts used to live."

"Gaunt?"

"Salazar Slytherin's last known descendants," said Amelia. "Marvolo Gaunt used to live there before he was taken to Azkaban."

"Marvolo," Harry paled. He saw the curious look on the other two's faces. "Have you heard of someone called Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

"Doesn't he have plaques for special services awards in the trophy room?" asked Susan.

Harry took a deep breath. "I discovered in my second year inside the Chamber of Secrets that Tom Marvolo Riddle was the true name of Lord Voldemort." Both the others winced when he said the name. He drew his wand and did the same flagrate spell as the memory-Riddle had done to show Amelia Bones that it was an anagram.

"Great Merlin!" Amelia cursed. "Death Eaters, necromancy and You Know Who... this doesn't look good."

"What about Pettigrew and Crouch?" asked Harry. "Don't they have any information?"

Amelia shook her head. "Veritaserum cannot force someone to talk, it only prevents them from saying falsehoods. Both of them have been quiet since their capture." She stood up. "This is a lead, however. Tom Marvolo Riddle. I'll send a team of Aurors to investigate the Riddles." She paused, looking at the two teenagers, and especially Harry. "I'll also have someone place stronger wards around this house first thing tomorrow."

Harry looked guilty that he was attracting danger to them but was relieved that his welcome didn't seem to be revoked.

Before leaving, Amelia Bones hesitated again. "There was an incident," she said cautiously, "near Little Whinging, Surrey."

Harry looked at her with wide eyes.

"Two rogue Dementors attacked a group of muggles," said Amelia. "Fortunately, a squib alerted us to the disturbance and Aurors were able to prevent any permanent harm."

Harry nodded, relieved to hear that. He wasn't much fond of Dementors. "What about Sirius Black?" he asked.

"Mr Black is unwilling to step into British soil until the ministerial elections are finished and the new Minister personally guarantees his safety."

Harry nodded. He had told Sirius to do that.

The day of the book signing came near and Harry was strangely looking forward to it. He waved at Ian when he saw him and rushed to shake hands and introduce Amelia and Susan.

"Berta sends her love," Ian said.

"Berta?" Susan asked curiously, before Harry could say anything.

"Eh..." Harry saw a part-guarded look on Susan's face and surreptitiously winked at Ian. "Didn't I tell you? I met this girl in the dragon reserve..."

"No, you didn't tell me," Susan said tightly. "Were you... close?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, with a lopsided grin. "We've been friends since first year. I met her during Christmas. It was amazing to see her again. She looks wonderful now."

"Oh."

"I thought I mentioned Berta to you," Harry said, feigning surprise. He saw Ian looking at them with amusement.

"No, you didn't."

"Must have slipped my mind," said Harry.

"It must have."

Harry saw her pout in a sulky but very cute manner, but Susan was trying hard not to make a scene. "Yeah, we had loads of fun," he said, as if reminiscing happily.

"Mm."

"Ha!" Ian joined in. "You were inseparable," said he, in an 'admit it' tone. "Even Ginny wouldn't try to butt in when you and Berta were... doing things alone."

"Oh?" Susan looked positively depressed.

"Here, I'll show you a picture of the two of us," said Harry, deciding to end her misery. He flicked open one of Ian's new books to a page where Harry was flying on his Firebolt with Norberta the dragon chasing after him. Both had expressions of delight on their faces, and the label read, 'A day in the life of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and Norberta, the Norwegian Ridgeback'.

"Harry!" Susan whined. "That was mean!"

Harry patted the back of her head affectionately. "Ian, this is Susan, my girlfriend."

"Pleased to meet you," said Ian. "And I recognised her from the picture next to your bed in the tent."

"Picture?" Susan asked curiously.

"Shh." Harry looked at Ian with annoyance. "She's not supposed to know."

"Picture?" Susan repeated, when Ian laughed and left them, and the two were standing at a counter where a crowd was already gathering. "You kept a picture of me next to your bed?"

Harry started thinking of an excuse but faltered at the adoring look in her eyes. "I still keep it," he said proudly. "You'll find it underneath my pillow. Took it from my pensieve... valentine's day."

"Oh." Susan remained silent for a while. "Can I have one too?"

"Of course," he said, and felt a warm glow within him when he saw Susan's confidence slowly begin to return to what it was before their fight.

He spent a couple of hours signing the picture of him and occasionally entertaining a question from reporters.

"Yes, I've been staying with Madam Bones after spending the first six weeks in the dragon reserve," said Harry. "I guess the dragons prepared me with the courage to face Susan's aunt."

"Yes, Susan and I are in a relationship," he said. "We've been together since shortly after the Yule Ball. No, I'm not thinking of starting a harem; aren't they illegal? Next."

"It was tough and I had to work harder than the other Champions as I am two years behind them," said Harry. "But the thought of winning the trophy for Hogwarts and Britain sustained me; and my friends Ginny, Neville and Hermione were of invaluable assistance. Susan's support was also vital to my success."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Harry, when asked a direct question about elections. "I'm not of age to vote and both my potions and transfiguration professors think I shouldn't even be given the right to think. But I'm not too fond of Fudge, he tried to get a Dementor to Kiss me... Madam Bones was there to stop him, of course. She told Auror Scrimgeour to take Fudge into custody and keep him under guard. Who else is running? Mr Diggory, oh I know him, he's also nice... I don't think he wanted me to win the Triwizard Tournament, but that's understandable... his son was my competitor."

"I suppose you could say that... Madam Bones has my support."

The rest of the day was spent in the Burrow, where Molly Weasley had invited Harry and Susan for dinner. Hermione was also invited, and Harry took the opportunity to spend some quality time with Ron and Hermione.

"Bulgaria was a unique experience," said Hermione. "Viktor showed me many monasteries and churches..."

Ron ignored her.

"And we're going on a ski trip this Christmas," said Hermione. "My parents really like him."

"That's nice," said Harry, trying to subtly change topics on seeing tell-tale signs of jealousy on Ron's face. But this time the jealousy was more understandable. Ron had a crush on Hermione. "It's a shame Ginny isn't here."

Susan nodded. "I really need to talk to her."

"Oh?" Ron said. "About what?"

"Stuff," Susan replied simply.

When they returned home, Amelia Bones had a surprise announcement to make.

"I have an offer for you," she told Harry. "Due to all the trouble you seem to attract," Susan smirked at him, "I'd like you to receive training from Aurors Robards and Shacklebolt during these last two weeks of holidays."

Harry was surprised.

"Aunty, can I also join?" asked Susan enthusiastically.

Amelia looked like she was going to refuse.

"Because if Harry attracts trouble, that puts me right in trouble's way," Susan pointed out. "And since I'm not letting go of him, it's best if I also receive training."

"I suppose." Amelia looked like she wouldn't particularly mind if Susan let go of Harry.

Training was intense. Aurors Robards and Shacklebolt immediately had a lot of respect for Harry, after seeing the wide arsenal of spells he already knew. None of them during their fifth year knew half as many. They decided, instead, to help Harry with his technique and control over magic, in turns, while the other helped Susan learn the more basic offensive and defensive spells.

The final day of their training, Robards asked Harry to show his previous combat experiences so they could prepare a fine-tuned routine for him to practice during Hogwarts.

"Typical Gryffindor," muttered Robards.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked curiously.

"Shoving your wand in a troll's nose is absolutely the most Gryffindorish thing you could have done short of trying to wrestle with your bare hands."

Harry protested, "I didn't know any other spell... except Lumos and transfiguring matchstick into needles."

Robards looked at him intently. "Exactly. A Slytherin would have used his cunning to realise that a Lumos spell would blind the troll, or at the very least, distract it long enough for the hostage to escape. A Ravenclaw would have studied the properties of the transfiguration spell and been able to transfigure the troll's club into a sharp metal object with the pointed end piercing its hand."

Harry frowned. "And a Hufflepuff?"

Robards grinned. "Cleverest of the lot. They would have brought a professor or a seventh year student along. But you survived."

Shacklebolt nodded at that. "Always, that is the only thing that matters."

"Survival," Harry repeated. He saw Susan nearby, looking slightly sick from the memory of him dangling around the troll, with his wand stuck in its nose. He groaned, realising the next few memories were going to be much worse.

Everyone was speechless.

"You faced a Death Eater possessed by Voldemort when you were eleven," Robards began, and Harry noted his use of the word Voldemort with interest, "and you live."

"Actually, that's nothing special," Susan said. "I know someone who faced You Know Who and survived when he was one."

Robards left the office without another word. He returned with a bottle of firewhisky. "Something tells me that wasn't even the worst of it."

"No." Harry shuddered. "The next one is." He looked at Susan with concern. "I don't think you want to see it."

"I don't," Susan responded. "But I must."

Harry nodded. He didn't follow them this time to see the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. A while later, the three of them returned. The two Aurors were ashen and moved straight to the firewhisky, while Susan simply walked to him with a vacant expression and held him protectively.

Nobody spoke about it, and Susan didn't join the Aurors for the next memory.

"You okay?" asked Harry.

"I didn't realise..." she said slowly. "This isn't an adventure... This is really life and death... It's always been that way for you..."

Harry looked away. "I know." He hesitated and opened his mouth.

"Don't," Susan cut him off.

"What?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Don't say I'll be safer if I stay away from you," said Susan.

"But you will be," said Harry.

"Being safe is not the same being happy," Susan protested. "I'd rather be happy than safe."

"But..."

"If being safe was all that mattered, wouldn't we all just lock ourselves in the deepest vaults of Gringotts and get the goblins to bring us meals every day?"

"That didn't make any sense," Harry said.

"It so did."

"It did not."

"It did," Shacklebolt muttered. "She's got a point, Harry. How would you feel if we decide that your safety is paramount and hence you should be kept in Auror Headquarters under constant surveillance?"

"I'd hate it," said Harry.

"Because being safe isn't what life is all about," said Shacklebolt.

"That's enough, you pansies," Robards sniffed. He wiped a tear. Nearly half the bottle of his firewhisky was finished. "Besides, how will you get more memories to make that fine Patronus of yours if you push little Susan away..."

"Little Susan..." Susan repeated sourly, she turned to face the grim-faced Auror.

"I dangled you on my knee when you were this high," Robards sniffed. "That was when..." He faltered, his mood became sombre.

"Since I don't remember that, I'll hazard a guess that I was a baby," said Susan. "And by your silence, that was after my parents were murdered by You Know Who."

The Aurors remained silent. The mood was grim.

"And he's trying to come back," Harry said quietly. He got up. "Thanks, Gawain, Kingsley. I really appreciate your help."

"Harry," Robards called out just before they left through the floo. "You didn't hear this from me, but there's troubling news going around."

"What?" asked Harry.

"Scrimgeour and Diggory are thinking of an alliance," said Robards. "They're both behind Amelia in the reckoning but if they pool the Wizengamot seats in their support, they get just enough to surpass



Amelia and hit the mark needed to form government... especially as the conservatives want Scrimgeour and the more liberal voters want Diggory."

"But that's preposterous!" Susan declared. "We've never had a coalition form government after the ministerial elections."

"Not true," Shacklebolt shook his head. "It has happened before during wars and goblin rebellions."

Their warning was timely. One of the two candidates, Harry wasn't sure who, started an all-out smear campaign against Harry and Amelia Bones. The Daily Prophet was being very objective in its reporting – but the Opinions page featured an article from the supporters of each candidate running the elections.

So, every day, of the four opinions that the casual reader saw, three – Fudge, Scrimgeour and Diggory, were blatantly anti-Harry Potter. Public opinion was easily swayed.

"Dragons," Harry declared on reading a particularly nasty article titled 'The Boy Who Cried Dark Lord'. "I want dragons... much nicer than politicians..."

Susan pouted. "My aunt is a politician..."

"Dragons!" Harry repeated urgently. "Give me dragons any time!"

Susan chuckled. They were in the back lawns of her house, spending the last day of their vacations lazily. Harry was pushing Susan on the swing.

"What will you do about it?" she asked.

"Must I do something?" Harry whined.

"You mean..." Susan pretended to be disappointed. "You won't defend my honour?" She alluded to an article which suggested that Susan Bones had enchanted Harry with love potions and the Bones were an evil influence on the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Ha! I wouldn't be surprised if that article is true," Harry stated, as he grabbed the metal chains and stopped Susan's swing. "It sure feels like I'm under a love potion."

Susan turned to face him. "What do you mean?"

"Just that I'm obsessed with you," said Harry, "and can't think straight when you're around."

Susan grinned back at him. "Glad to know the feeling's mutual."

"But you're right," said Harry seriously. "I shouldn't let them get away with this."

He sat down on the grass by her legs in deep thought.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Susan after a few minutes.

"Dumbledore," said Harry. He saw Susan's confusion and clarified, "I need Dumbledore on our side." He frowned. "But he won't do it on his own. He indirectly told me I'm on my own and he won't help me at all. Then how? How do I get Dumbledore to speak in my side? How?"

"Maybe... you don't really need Dumbledore to do anything," Susan was thinking deeply as well. "Maybe... you could construe something he's already done to sound like he's supporting you."

Harry whipped his head to her. "You're a genius," he whispered. He got up. "I need to speak to Ludo. You coming?"

"Aunt Amelia won't be happy if we leave the property," said Susan. But Harry was already running to the fireplace. She shrugged and followed after him.

The moment Harry and Susan emerged through the floo in Ludo Bagman's office, the senior Ministry official jumped out of his seat and shut the door before anyone could say Quidditch.

"Harry!" Ludo sounded part-happy and part-annoyed to see him. "You really shouldn't be seen here. The Ministry is very volatile... and..."

"I'm an instant political suicide for all my supporters if anyone but Amelia Bones comes to power," Harry finished.

Bagman didn't see the need to argue. "Yes."

"What's the outlook?" asked Harry.

"Nearly two-thirds of the Wizengamot seats have been polled," said Bagman. "It's one of the tightest elections in recent memory. Amelia is just ahead of anyone else individually, but if, as the rumours suggest, Scrimgeour and Diggory go for a coalition..."

"I need a favour," said Harry. "I need you to send a picture to the editor of the Daily Prophet anonymously. It must reach the big man himself, perhaps as a clandestine secret picture unearthed by someone. With an air of mystery."

"I suppose I can do that," Bagman didn't sound too pleased. "I'll drop by the Daily Prophet head office to speak to their sports correspondent and slip it in. What picture is this?"

"Wait." Harry removed his ring and enlarged it.

"That's a nice way to make your pensieve portable," said Bagman, on seeing that the gemstone on Harry's ring was actually a pensieve.

Harry pushed a memory inside, went in with Bagman's camera, and came out with a moving snapshot.

The picture was from the medical wing after the final task. Dumbledore, Amelia Bones and Amos Diggory were talking in consternation.

Bagman saw it. A small grin came on his face. He laughed heartily. "This will throw some bother in the Scrimgeour-Diggory romance. But I'm afraid this comes a bit too late. Nearly two-thirds of the seat have been contested."

"I know, sir," said Harry. "This isn't for politics."

"Then?" asked Bagman, in surprise.

"This is because they annoyed Susan," said Harry seriously, and nobody was in doubt that he spoke truthfully. "When I'm done with them, they'll never want to show their faces in public again."

But the next day, Harry woke up early and packed his things to leave for Hogwarts. When he came down, Amelia Bones was reading the paper with a grim face.

"So," she said quietly. "There's a Bones-Dumbledore-Diggory conspiracy to create chaos by sowing fear about the return of You Know Who?"

"Is that all?" Harry was disappointed.

"Dumbledore's age and sanity has been called into question. His resignation from the Wizengamot is being demanded."

Harry was pleased.

"Harry, let it go," said Amelia sadly. "I may have won the most seats in the Wizengamot, but Diggory and Scrimgeour collectively surpass me and they have already reached an agreement. Scrimgeour will be Minister and Diggory will be his Senior Undersecretary."

"Madam Bones," Harry said seriously, as Susan entered the dining room. "I really don't care who forms this government. This is about getting one over those who annoyed Susan. Who started the attack on Dumbledore?"

"That was Diggory," said Amelia. "I suppose he believes Dumbledore sneaked that picture into the Daily Prophet to ruin his alliance with Scrimgeour."

Harry refused to comment on it until he was in the Hogwarts Express with Susan, Neville, Ginny and Hannah.

"The seeds of doubts," said Harry. "Most of Diggory's supporters, such as Mr Weasley, have strong faith in Albus Dumbledore."

Susan grinned. "They feel betrayed by Diggory's stance now, especially after his alliance with Scrimgeour. Diggory stands on a crossroad now. He can stay true to his supporters and drop his attack on Dumbledore, or else..."

"Hopefully, Diggory will keep up his attack on Dumbledore."

"Why?" asked Neville.

"Because, if Dumbledore is forced to resign by this unusual coalition government," Harry was serious, "nobody will take the Wizengamot's rulings seriously."

Susan nodded. "People will think they wanted to do things that Dumbledore would never approve, and so they had to get rid of him first."

Ginny was frowning. "But surely Scrimgeour's side will also think of these things?" she addressed her question to Susan.

Harry nodded. He felt slightly hurt by Ginny, she hadn't spoken to him directly all day. "But he'll have to choose, to either ignore Diggory's attack on Dumbledore and expose a rift in their alliance, which will allow Madam Bones to call for a vote of no-confidence, or echo the same sentiments and risk losing people's support. I'm forcing his hand."

"I'm going for a walk," said Susan, standing up.

"Shall I come?" Harry looked at her.

"Don't be silly. I'm going to the girl's toilet." Susan shook her head at Harry. "Ginny, you up for a stroll?"

Ginny looked surprised and rather circumspect, but she nodded and got up.

Neville and Hannah exchanged glances. "I hope they don't kill each other," Neville muttered.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Harry, but he looked concerned as well. It took the two redheads nearly half an hour to return and Harry was getting rather restless, but they burst into the compartment with their arms interlinked, and Ginny was laughing rather happily at something.

"You should have seen..." Ginny gasped for breath. "Colin Creevey... robes transfigured... kimono..." She looked at Harry appraisingly. "You need to buck up, mister. Susan's my new hero now."

Harry grinned at the two, and Ginny, who had been quiet and reluctant to speak to him directly before this, was back to her normal self. "Little Susan's been naughty, has she?" He felt two punches on two sides by two redheads. "Ouch," he complained. He turned to Ginny with a betrayed look. "Ginny!"

"It's team red!" Ginny exclaimed, and both she and Susan hit their fists against each other.

"Go team," Susan said.

Harry rubbed his forehead, and noticed the sympathetic looks Neville and Hannah were sending at him. As the train journey went on, the teenagers started dozing off. Hannah was the first to fall asleep and Neville put his arm around her. Ginny was the next, and she leaned back in an uncomfortable position, but Susan glared at Harry and looked at Ginny pointedly.

"What?" Harry mouthed soundlessly.

Susan pointed to his arm and made a gesture to ease Ginny a bit.

Harry looked at her in surprise, but Susan kept glaring. Shrugging, Harry extended both his arms, allowing Ginny to unconsciously slip closer to him, resting her head against his shoulder, and Susan observed them for a moment, before nodding with satisfaction, she leaned against Harry and closed her eyes.

Harry couldn't sleep. At some point he saw Ginny wake up and look in surprise at how close she was and Harry's arm around her. She looked at him curiously but Harry smiled reassuringly. Ginny touched his cheek tenderly but removed his arm and settled by herself against the window.

Later, when Harry and Susan walked to the castle alone, opting not to take the carriages, Susan explained. "You have a lot more freedom with Ginny than other girls," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Hugs, holding each other and innocent kisses," said Susan. "I won't mind."

Harry paused. "Thanks," he said finally. "You had a nice girl chat?"

Susan nodded, but refused to say more about what they spoke. "She sent you back to me," she explained instead. "I owe her that much."

They walked in silence, holding each other's hands.

"Have you thought about your OWL project?" asked Susan.

Harry frowned.

"Oh, dear," Susan sighed. "You don't know about it, do you?"

Harry shook his head.

"It's an optional course," she said. "You can do a project in any area of magic and allow the external examiners to check it."

"What's the advantage?"

"An extra grade," Susan said. "An opportunity to learn something useful. Potential job offers. Many Hufflepuffs take up healing; Ravenclaws are more keen on spell-weaving, to modify existing spells or occasionally to create a new one."

"What about Slytherins and Gryffindors?"

"They usually avoid it," said Susan. "Although... I think Angelina Johnson made a prototype remote-controlled brooms like muggle toy cars."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yeah," said Susan. "It was a shame that the toy exploded when the examiner was testing it. Still, she got an Exceeds Expectations and a job offer from Nimbus."

"How do you hear all this?"

"Because, my dear," Susan poked his ribs. "I'm a Hufflepuff, I work hard all year, while you Gryffindors laze around staring at the fire and biting your fingernails."

"I don't bite my nails."

"Well, then maybe you should consider biting them," Susan exclaimed. "Then they wouldn't be so hopelessly out of shape."

"You think my fingernails are out of shape?" Harry asked. He raised his hand to observe them.

"Some," said Susan, she pointed to the ones that were offensive. "That one. And that one."

"I'll cut them properly next time," Harry promised.

"Cough-whipped-cough."

Harry turned his head around. It was Neville. Harry turned to Susan with wide Bambi eyes. "Flatulence hex?"

Susan looked at him indulgently. "You know very well that that hex must be earned. Neville didn't say anything incorrect."

His pleading eyes became wider.

"Your eye-thing only works for snogging, necking and the occasional petting," said Susan.

"Maybe... that's what I really want," said Harry, as if he had a revelation. Neville laughed and walked briskly to leave them alone.

"You're incorrigible," Susan laughed. "We'll miss the Sorting."

Harry shrugged. "I've missed it twice in the last four years. It's nothing unusual for me."

"We'll get into trouble!" Susan protested.

"We can pretend someone hexed us," said Harry.



"That's a lie," said Susan.

"Not if I hex you with a bedazzlement charm and you do the same to me," Harry pointed out. He regarded her.

"Gryffindor git," Susan accused.

"Hufflepuff goody two-shoes," Harry retorted.

"But you still like me."

"I can't deny that."

"Somebody just hex them!" a voice came from behind. "Before my head explodes with all this fluff."

"As you wish, dear brother," a near identical voice also came. "Petrificus."

"Fred, come back!" Harry yelled in alarm. His body neck-down was petrified. "I'm too far from her. Can't reach..." He tried to stretch his neck towards Susan, who was also petrified, as well as mortified.

"Do you hear something, favourite twin o' mine?" asked one of the twins.

"FRED! GEORGE!"

"A mosquito is buzzing around my ears," said the other. "Oddly sounds like your name."

"And yours."

"Ah. Let's head to the castle."

"The treacle awaits."

"FRED!"

"I really like chocolate, that's a different kind of sweet than the fluffy sugary thing kids these days spew out."

"GEORGE!"

"So true."

They did manage to make it to the Sorting Ceremony midway, when Professor Flitwick, who was a short distance behind them freed the two teenagers and escorted them to the castle.

After the Sorting, Dumbledore introduced their new Defence against the Dark Arts professor – Dolores Umbridge, who was also the High Inquisitor to Hogwarts, as a last-minute appointment. Her task, assigned to her by Rufus Scrimgeour himself, was to check the quality of guidance the students were receiving, and whether there was any scope for improvement.

To Harry, it was clear that Scrimgeour was staying clear of making a direct insult at Dumbledore, but was instead making subtle attacks, while trying to gather evidence of any misconduct.

Later, Harry sat with Hermione in the Gryffindor common room.

"You doing the project thing?" he asked.

Hermione looked surprised that he knew of it. "Yes. I'm trying to work out how magic accounts for Newton's third law of motion."

"Which one is that?" Harry asked curiously, remembering vaguely having read something in his final year of elementary school.

"Every action has an equal and opposite reaction," said Hermione. "Like, for instance, when you vanish an object, it simply shrinks into an infinitesimal size. But where does the reactionary force disappear? How does magic account for it?"

"Wow." Harry felt a sudden urge to back away from Hermione. "That's ambitious."

"I know," Hermione "All the professors have said that to me. I wrote to them in the summer."

"I think I should do something as well," said Harry glumly.

Hermione smiled at him. "Harry, your Corporeal Patronus is qualified as an extra project that will surely fetch you an Outstanding in Defence or Charms project."

Harry was surprised, but he shook his head. "It's about doing something new and useful, rather than just getting a grade." Hermione looked surprised and delighted by his response. "Any suggestions?"

"Well," said Hermione. "The two general options are to learn something in a new branch of magic not taught as part of the Hogwarts curriculum or to do something advanced in an existing one. Dumbledore's project was in transfiguration. He created the Bluebell Flames spell."

Harry was surprised.

Hermione continued. "James Potter managed a self-transfiguration."

Harry stared at her.

"There's a record of all the Outstanding and Exceeds Expectations projects in the library," explained Hermione. "Your father performed a self-transfiguration into a stag."

"You mean Animagus?" Harry corrected her.

Hermione chuckled. "Yeah, we know that. But in the record it states he did a self-transfiguration. He perhaps wanted to keep his Animagus a secret."

"Oh. Was there anything about...?"

Hermione didn't need him to finish. "Lily Evans' project was on researching secondary foci to make short-term charms last for a longer duration. She had rings with gemstones as focus. One of them levitated the wearer two feet above ground. Another kept the wearer warm in cold weather. The third was a Flame-Freezing Charm. The wearer would not be affected by fire."

Harry was surprised. "What did she get?"

"The examiner's feedback said that it wasn't practical to test the length of time for the second and third charms during the course of the examination, but he noted that the effects lasted longer than ten minutes each. But it was the levitation ring, which didn't require a constant focus with a wand, that got her the Outstanding," said Hermione. "The examiner also expressed regret that Lily did not choose three charms that could be tested for efficiency during the examination itself to beat the all-time high score, because her efforts certainly deserved it."

Harry pursed his lips.

"You're going to do one of these, aren't you?" asked Hermione.

"What do you think?" asked Harry. "Should I?"

Hermione looked at him strangely, but sounded pleased by his question. "Your strength is in Defence but you already have something there to fall back upon, so maybe you could take up something more ambitious. But Animagus is really uncertain; you'll have to brew a potion that takes eight months to prepare and a lot of care and effort, and your effort may be wasted if you don't find an inner animal."

"Self-transfiguration?" asked Harry.

"It's really dangerous," said Hermione. "Unless you get a professor to guide you, I'd suggest something else."

"Okay. I'll do what my mum did but learn from her mistakes." Harry got up. "Thanks, Hermione, you've been a great help."

"You're welcome, Harry," she said. "I'm glad you're taking a greater interest in your studies."

Harry grinned at her.

The next time he was in the library he borrowed the book on projects. Madam Pince told him to make his own copy and Harry obliged.

He read his mother's project carefully. She had powered three charms using a secondary focus to sustain each one. Her claim was that the anyone who wore the rings, which were the secondary focus,

would for a period of one month nonstop, at the very least, enjoy the benefits of the charm. She also had a list of various gemstones and other materials which could be used as a focus for different charms. She had extensive tables with results of her experiments to find the best match between a focus and a charm. Her project was funded by Flitwick and Slughorn jointly.

She also worked on an existing hypothesis that with a powerful-enough focus, the effects of some charms, with certain special properties, could be stored so that they would only work on an activation code, without requiring any spells or wand magic to power them. The rings could become sources of individual magical powers. She hoped to continue her research in this area after finishing her NEWTs.

The only criticism for the project by the examiner, as Hermione had stated, was that two of the three charms she had used couldn't be tested adequately during the exam. She should have selected three instantaneous charms, such as the levitation one, which fails the moment the wand is raised, and then it would have been easier to study the increased duration of the charm under a secondary focus. But Lily had erred on the side of utility, as the three charms she picked were very useful, and the examiner personally requested Lily to make a ring with the warming charm for her use. The examiner also wished fervently that someone, if not Lily herself, would continue with the research.

"Wow," said Harry, on turning through the twenty-five page project report of Lily Evans. "Mum was Hermione, version one."

He took out a parchment and began writing.

Charms with a Secondary Focus: A development of the research done by Lily Potter nee Evans

He looked at it proudly and added, 'by Harry James Potter' on the next line.

"Now all I need is to actually do some development of mum's research," he muttered to himself. "Invisibility rings sound good." He jotted that idea down. "But again, they won't be able to determine the extent of its usefulness in the exam... unless... I use one of mum's other hypotheses and make it code-activated."

Suddenly, Harry decided he didn't have to extend Lily's project to make short-term charms work for longer; he could simply use the idea of secondary foci and make some useful applications that allow people to use difficult charms without having to cast the magic with real-life utility.

He referred to Lily's notes and saw that the Disillusionment Charm for invisibility required pure twenty-four carat gold to act as focus, with runes carved on it. But she didn't pursue that path, maybe because she didn't want to buy pure gold rings for a mere project.

Harry groaned. He wished he had taken the Ancient Runes option instead of Divination in his third year. He left that aside for now, to do it if he had time to go through a quick study of runes.

He dismissed Cheering Charms as it wasn't as useful as some others. "Such as Imperturbable Charm," he jotted that down next. That charm created an invisible barrier around an object or person, protecting him from solid objects and most low-power curses. "Will be dead useful in duels."

Lily had considered that as well but hadn't developed it for some reason of her own. The charm required an intricate consultation of Arithmancy equations to weave a pattern on wood to act as an adequate foci.

Suddenly, a few words caught his eye in the appendix. The Patronus Charm. He groaned when he read the passage. Lily hypothesised that any inert objects, such as an ordinary pebble, would need to be infused in a special potion for a month to imbue the desired properties. However, she ruthlessly dismissed the task of creating such a potion just for this purpose, and that's why that particular charm was moved to the appendix. In fact, Harry got the feeling Lily was being particularly savage in her dismissal of the Patronus Charm from her project.

Harry was frustrated. Why couldn't the interesting charms have an ordinary secondary focus? Like ruby or quartz. "If only she had given instructions for the potion as well," Harry sighed, not finding any mention of the potion in the appendix. He pushed that idea for the time being as well. Slightly dejected, Harry flicked through the pages of the book to read other projects. His mood lightened on

reading the feedback his father had received for his Self-Transfiguration.

'James Potter is a transfiguration prodigy... an astonishing student. His wand work was flawed, his intonation of the spell was flawed... but the effect was perfect. James performed a flawless work of Self-Transfiguration into a magnificent stag. The antlers were well-defined, the body appeared remarkable, down to the finest detail, to an extent I have never seen before. A genius in the making.'

"Way to go, dad," said Harry, chuckling. "Mum works so hard and you just step in and say some mumble-jumble while changing into your Animagus form... typical..."

He kept reading. Sirius wasn't there. Remus wasn't there either.

McGonagall had, surprisingly, not done her Animagus transformation as part of this project. She had instead worked on developing an existing theory of Cross-Species Transfiguration, that some species were easier to transfigure into certain others and harder with others. For instance, it was easier to transfigure a cat into a tiger, then say, a cat into a dog. Her work, however, had been discredited by Bartemius Crouch Jr. who showed that it wasn't a species-specific difficulty but rather an individual thing. Some cats wouldn't mind becoming dogs. As part of his flourishing finale, he transfigured the examiner's owl into a ferret, which according to McGonagall's hypothesis should have been impossible.

The examiner was overjoyed by his performance and gave him more points than McGonagall.

That jogged something in Harry's memory. Crouch in his disguise as Moody had punished Zacharias Smith by turning him into a ferret, and McGonagall had been most distressed by that.

"Ulterior motives," Harry muttered to himself. "Everyone has them. Maybe more than one."

He saw the next one and frowned. Severus Snape. His OWL level project was to devise a potion that would imbue the properties of the Patronus Charm on an ordinary pebble. Harry frowned, he quickly shifted the pages to his mother's project.

There was no denying it. Snape had purposefully chosen his project as an addendum to Lily's. But why? Were they friends? Snape credited Lily with the idea for this potion and briefly referred to her project in his report. Then, why didn't Lily do the same to Snape's? Why didn't she mention in her appendix that someone had actually made the potion she needed? In fact, she had been particularly scathing in her brief passage on the Patronus Charm.

Harry read through Snape's report, and was impressed. It was as meticulously researched as Lily's, and received an Outstanding as well.

'Severus Snape has shown rare gift in potions. This is the first time in over two centuries that an underage wizard has created a new potion. However, it befuddles the examiner why he chose to make a potion with such a complex effect lacking any utility whatsoever. An Outstanding is merited, but unfortunately, an Outstanding with much lower marks than if he had made something with greater utility.'

Harry frowned. Perhaps they had collaborated together to present a joint-project to begin with and then had a falling out? Lily's response did look like a typical teenage girl's vindictive blow against someone who had hurt her. Harry shuddered. He didn't like the thought of his mother and Snape being friends... that was just so wrong.

And yet.

The kind of hatred Snape had for him was unnatural. Was it perhaps more than because of his enmity with James? Was it because of a completely different nature of relationship between Snape and Lily?

Harry shuddered, he pushed aside such thoughts and read the potion again. It wasn't too hard to make, now that he had proper instructions. But of course, Harry was glad someone had done it. It would have been impossible for Harry to have created it himself.

He put a tick mark against the Patronus Charm. He was definitely going to do that. He kept scanning the list on his mother's report for any other charms he could use.

"Harry!"



A smile came on Harry's face on hearing the voice and he raised his head. Susan and a group of Hufflepuffs were approaching him.

"A Gryffindor in the library on the first morning who doesn't answer to the name Hermione," said Hannah. "Is it raining pigs outside?"

"Good morning to you too, Hannah," Harry said dryly. He pushed the chair next to him for Susan to sit, ignoring the glares the boys in their group, other than Justin, were giving him. Harry frowned when he saw Ernie MacMillan and Wayne Hopkins in their group. Both of them had been mean to Susan towards the end of the previous year.

"Madam Pince said you've got the last copy of the book on OWL projects," said Ernie. "Hand it over, Potter. You're hogging it."

"That's not what she said," said Susan. "Harry, she said to ask you for a copy?"

Harry nodded. "Geminio Sextus." He handed one to each of the Hufflepuffs, before turning to Susan with a proud look. "I have decided what to do for my project."

Susan was surprised. She looked at Harry with an open mouthed smile. "So quick? You didn't even know of the project course until yesterday. Are you trying to impress me?"

"Are you impressed?" asked Harry in return.

"Depends," said Susan. "What's your project on?"

Harry pushed his parchment to her with all that he had scribbled so far.

Charms with a Secondary Focus: A development of the research done by Lily Potter nee Evans  
By Harry James Potter

1. Disillusionment Charm – golden ring as focus, requires runic carving (need help - Hermione)
2. Imperturbable Charm – wood as focus, in a pattern based on Arithmancy equations (need help - Hermione)
3. Patronus Charm – ordinary pebble will work if infused in a potion (refer Snape's project)

"Wow," Susan said after reading it. The others were also reading the brief notes. "That's ambitious. Performing any one of those three advanced charms would get you a top grade in itself."

"How sweet," Hannah smirked. "Little Harry is following in mommy's footsteps and finishing the work she started."

"And what's wrong with that?" Harry demanded.

"Absolutely nothing," Susan brushed her head against him. "I think it's rather sweet."

Harry grinned triumphantly.

"Oh, get a room, you two," Hannah grimaced. "Didn't you get enough touching and feeling in the train?"

"No," said Susan.

"Definitely not enough," Harry added.

Author's Notes:

Thanks for all the wonderful reviews. Next week, I'll start replying to all the reviews that have asked questions/made suggestions etc. Was a bit busy last week; travelling around Asia. Can't wait to get back to London... all this sun is getting a bit too much...

Some readers have expressed concerns about the Hellmouth and the Buffy connection. Let me reassure everyone that the connection won't come until much later, and it will be very weak, and almost non-existent. I just didn't like the thought of making OCs and so decided that the brief role I need for OCs to fill in, could be done by some other canon characters.

One more thing: I have been working partly on another couple of fics; both of which are HarrySusan. Let me know if you'd like me to post them as well. Updates will be slow for both of them, but if there's enough interest, I'll do it.

Thanks again, for the reviews. Look forward to many more.

## Chapter 6

Dear Harry

I have enclosed all the items you asked for your project, and I sent five extra of each. Lily ended up exploding a few on her early attempts while doing her project. The scorch marks might still be present in the common room, check beneath the picture of Hogsmeade.

You asked me whether Lily would approve... Harry, somewhere in a better place than this, Lily is gushing with pride that her baby is following in her footsteps. She's bickering with James about whose son you really are – hers or James'. However, James will get the last word by saying, 'Evans, that brat is chasing after you and pulling your heartstrings... clearly, he takes after me...'

France is wonderful. I met Ludo Bagman and he insisted I stay in a five star resort... on Ministry expenses, of course. He was sent by Scrimgeour to offer me a complete pardon with immediate effect and protection from any unwarranted accidents... but his condition was that after I take over your guardianship, I will have to make you the Ministry's poster boy. So I guess I will be staying in France for a while longer. I would really like you to visit me this summer. Bring Susan, if that's the only way you'll come.

Good luck again, and lots of love  
Sirius

Harry opened the package and saw all the potions ingredients and material he had asked for. "Great," he exclaimed. He had all the equipment he needed. He pushed the ingredients into his cauldron and rushed out of his dorm.

"Whoa, Harry!" someone called after him, and he stopped instantly.

"Sorry, Ginny. I didn't see you there," Harry looked at her.

"Story of my life," Ginny muttered under her breath.

Harry didn't catch it. "Huh? You said something?"

"I'm just surprised to see you so excited with a cauldron in your hand," said Ginny. "Because usually, cauldrons mean potions, and potions means Snape."

Harry chuckled. "I am going to make a potion as part of my OWL project."

"Is it safe?" asked Ginny. "More importantly, is it legal?"

"It's safe and legal," Harry rolled his eyes at the strange priorities girls tended to have.

"You sure," Ginny looked at him unsurely. "I've heard stories of the number of cauldrons you have exploded and..."

"Hey!" Harry was slightly outraged. "That's because some Slytherin sabotages my potions nearly every other week! That's not my fault! Besides, you worry too much!"

Ginny grinned. "So, is it anything fun?"

Harry looked at her and then his cauldron. "Do you want to give me a hand?" he asked, and she brightened. "To keep me from exploding it..."

"Sure," said Ginny.

They went to an unused classroom with a fireplace. "You light the fire," said Harry, while he spread out all the ingredients. "This is for my OWL project. I'm continuing my mum's research and making a ring, which will act as a secondary focus to charms."

"Okay," said Ginny slowly. "What does a secondary focus do exactly?"

"It can be used for many purposes," said Harry. "Think of it as an automatic detached wand that can perform a particular spell when you want it to. Self-shrinking trunks, brooms, enlarged money bags and invisibility cloaks make use of charms powered by a secondary focus. What I'm doing here is making an object that will store a Patronus in it, releasing it on an activation code."

"But if you store your Patronus in an object, how will you use it again if you need to and don't have the ring with you?" asked Ginny.

Harry turned to her. "You know, Susan also twirls her hair like that."

Ginny instantly let go of it, and looked slightly annoyed at his comparison.

"Remember what I told you of the Life-Loss transfiguration? How the soul replenishes that which is lost?"

Ginny nodded. "Like one's heart replenishes blood. So you're saying one can cast multiple Patroni?"

"If one tries to summon a Patronus by casting the spell properly but the Patronus is trapped, then the soul may send a new one," said Harry. "That's what I think is correct after reading the ancient treatises on the Patronus Charm and talking to Professor Flitwick. Nobody has tested this before."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully.

"The potion here will make an inert object acquire properties to act as a focus for the Patronus Charm," said Harry.

Harry was surprised to see how good Ginny was in potions. She worked through the ingredients efficiently and took charge of the whole process.

"Wow," said Harry, when they were finished and were waiting for the potion to get ready. "You should consider taking potions for your OWL project next year."

"I was thinking of Transfiguration," admitted Ginny. "Mr Cuddlebug is just so adorable, I'm beginning to enjoy the course a lot more, just seeing the red-shelled tortoise in my room that I transfigured myself is so inspiring."

Harry laughed. "Your animate transfiguration has lasted over a month. This is great. Mine don't last longer than a week."

Ginny clapped. "So there is something at which I'm better than the great Harry Potter!"

"You're an amazing witch, Ginny," said Harry reassuringly. "I'm sorry I haven't spent a lot of time with you since the dragon reserve."

"Merlin, help me survive another self-loathing Harry Potter monologue." Ginny rolled her eyes. "I was in Romania, silly."

Harry chuckled. "How was that? How were Janna's people?"

"It was very nice," Ginny turned to Harry with wondrous eyes. "The Kalderash Clan have suffered so much in the past, but they are so resilient, and strong in magic. Janna told me a heart wrenching story of a vampire named Angelus that killed an entire generation of their children."

"The Scourge of Europe," Harry stated.

"Yes, him."

"You will study him in History later this year," said Harry. He hit his forehead. "So that's where I'd read of Janna's clan. They somehow restored his soul."

"Janna's going to the United States later this year and has invited me to visit her in the summer," said Ginny. "She even convinced mum that a short trip will do me a lot of good."

"You're going?" asked Harry slowly, a strange feeling of loss emerging within him.

"For a while," said Ginny. "It's tough at home... with Percy abandoning the family, and the twins wanting to start a joke shop... dad's facing trouble at work... it'll be nice to go away for a few weeks."

Harry paused. "Come with me to France," he said. "I'm going to visit Sirius and head out to the beaches... It'll be fun."

Ginny perked up. But she shook her head. "You'll want to spend time alone with Susan. I'll be a painful third wheel."

Harry frowned at her. "You're not a third wheel," he tried to convince her. "You're my best friend."

"I know," said Ginny, with a smile. "But until this best friend gets her heart and head sorted out, you don't get to see her in a bikini."

Harry grinned. "I would really like to see you in a bikini."

"Tough. It's not happening." Ginny got up. She checked the potion. It was ready, and she pulled it out.

"Looks exactly as it should," said Harry. "So, this is how it feels to make a perfect potion."

Ginny laughed. They were about to leave, when Ginny said, "Harry, you're going to Hogsmeade next week with Susan, right?"

Harry nodded.

"I was asked out by Anthony Goldstein," said Ginny. "I said yes. Can we meet up for a double date?"

Harry was stunned. "Goldstein," he said slowly, not aware that his eyes had narrowed and he was looking furious. He saw Ginny look at him strangely and shook himself. "Of course... double date... definitely."

A short while later, Harry was still fuming. He was pacing in front of his girlfriend.

"He's not good enough for her!" Harry declared.

Susan considered his statement.

"I'm telling you," Harry persisted. "What does she even see in Anthony Goldstein? She can do a lot better than him."

"Yeah?" said Susan. "Like whom? Give me the name of someone you think deserves Ginny."

Harry opened his mouth. He shut it. He opened again to say Neville, but no, Neville was great, just not that great. He shut it again. Then he frowned at her. "You're missing the point. This isn't about me... This is about Goldstein not being good enough for Ginny!"

Susan giggled. "Harry, this is all about you. You're afraid of losing her."

"Where did you get that from?" Harry demanded.

Susan took a deep breath. "Harry, would you rather be with Ginny than me?"

Harry blanched. "Are you insane? What kind of question is that? I only want you."

Susan softened. "Are you sure?"

Harry paused and reflected. Then, he nodded. "I am absolutely sure."

"And Ginny accepted that. She accepted me," Susan sounded angry. "So why can't you accept Anthony Goldstein? You're being very selfish, and I hate seeing you like this."

Harry balked at her tone. "I'm being selfish?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes." Susan said sternly. "Come here." She gently slipped into Harry's arms and held him gently for a few moments in silence.

"You are right," Harry agreed finally. "I'm being unfair." He looked at Susan with puppy dog eyes. "Can I - ?"

"No. Absolutely no hexing of Anthony in Hogsmeade!" Susan said strictly even before he could finish asking the question. "I want your word."

Harry sulked.

"Your word."

"Fine," Harry agreed. "But you didn't say anything about before we go to Hogsmeade."

Susan shrugged. "As long as he makes it to Hogsmeade without any side-effects and doesn't need medical attention."



But the days between then and Hogsmeade kept Harry extremely busy. Dolores Umbridge, especially, had taken a strong stance against Harry and was seeing him in detention nearly every alternate evening. But as Harry had predicted, she seemed more eager to get material to discredit Dumbledore.

And Harry was willing to oblige.

"Army?" Harry pretended to be shocked, putting in a little too much effort into appearing surprised. "No, no, no, Professor Umbridge... there's no army... Dumbledore's not training us at all... no, no, of course not... he's just.. a headmaster..."

"Then, why, may I ask, is a mere OWL level student capable of Auror level spells?" asked Umbridge in her sickly sweet voice.

"That's because..." Harry froze. "I mean, there's no army..."

"Tell me, Potter," said Umbridge, feeling triumphant. "You don't want to fall afoul of the Ministry. Tell me the truth and I will make sure you don't get blamed at all."

Harry darted his eyes from the door to the window.

"We are alone," said Umbridge. "My foe glass will reveal if anyone is eavesdropping on us."

"It's not... it's not for an army... Dumbledore's training me to fight Voldemort..."

Umbridge winced at the mention of the name.

"He told me that Voldemort," Harry paused while Umbridge winced, "will come back, and it is my destiny to fight Voldemort." Umbridge winced again. "But how can I fight Voldemort," Harry waited a moment for the wince, "unless I learn Auror level spells?"

"I assure you, Mr Potter," Umbridge said sternly. "He Who Must Not be Named is not coming back. You are being deluded by Dumbledore to stand for his political agenda."

Harry pretended to be stunned. "You mean... Dumbledore is manipulating me?" asked Harry, sounding horrified.

"I'm afraid so," said Umbridge gravely. "I see it now... you are blameless in this... just a poor child who followed the guidance of someone he respected... but you must open your eyes, Mr Potter. Dumbledore does not have your best interests in mind!"

"Dumbledore's manipulating me?" Harry repeated, as if in a daze. "You mean the troll... it was a test?"

"What troll?" Umbridge leaned forward with gleaming eyes.

Half an hour later, Harry left the office with a satisfied look on his face. He had what he wanted – Dolores Umbridge was convinced she had Harry Potter on her side and willing to give a press statement about Dumbledore's illegal activities.

He saw Ginny working on her assignment in the common room and felt an urge to join her, but repressed it when he saw how deeply she was concentrating on her work. But Hermione, sitting next to Ginny, waved at him and he joined her.

"I spoke to Professor Babbling," said Hermione. "You need to refer to Advanced Rune Translation to find runes to aid invisibility. You might also need to refer to Spellman's Syllabary in case you can't understand some runes... That's why the basic books you've been reading were unhelpful. But Harry," she smiled at him sweetly. "Why don't you just refer to the runes in your Invisibility Cloak?"

Harry observed Hermione. "There are runes in my Invisibility Cloak?" he asked simply.

"Near the front pocket."

"Oh," Harry frowned. "That wasn't just a design?"

"No. They are definitely the runes you need," said Hermione sweetly.

"So, I spent the last fortnight teaching myself the basics of runes when I could have just copied this extremely rare rune from my Invisibility Cloak?" Harry repeated slowly.

"Yes." Hermione was grinning.

"Is there a reason you waited until now to tell me all this?" Harry asked slowly.

"Of course," Hermione patted his shoulder. "To gain knowledge and build character. Now, you can understand and identify basic runes quite well."

Harry got up, there was a mischievous grin on his face.

"Harry, what are you... whatever, it is, don't do it..." Hermione was flustered. She got up, and her heart broke. All her books had sprouted wings and were flying away from her. "NO! HARRY POTTER, FIX THIS AT ONCE!"

Harry stopped near the stairway to his dorm, and observed Hermione chasing after the books all over the common room, to the amusement of everyone else. "On the bright side, Hermione, chasing after knowledge also builds character." He saw Ginny give him a thumbs up without raising her head from her assignment, and he grinned at her.

The next day, however, the whole of Hogwarts was shocked. The reason for that, of course, was that Rufus Scrimgeour had finally spoken directly against Dumbledore. The articles were titled:

Dumbledore Attacks Harry Potter With Troll

Dumbledore Manipulates Boy Who Lived

Dumbledore's Army: A Rising Threat?

Harry read the articles with amusement. Rufus Scrimgeour had commented extensively in all three of them. He saw a heated conversation between Dolores Umbridge and Minerva McGonagall on the high table, whereas Dumbledore was casually nibbling his bacon, oblivious to the uncertain looks he was receiving from nearly everyone.

Harry got up and walked to the high table. Professor Umbridge had promised him a press statement in public. Several reporters had gathered. Harry looked at Umbridge for permission.

"Go on, Mr Potter," urged Umbridge, after giving a brief statement about the horrors that Dumbledore has unleashed on the students of Hogwarts. "There is absolutely no reason to worry... by your word, Dumbledore will be out of Hogwarts by nightfall... go on, tell the world what you told me..."

Harry faced the reporters and Rita Skeeter winked at him. She knew what he had been planning.

"Hogwarts: A History, page 398, states the oath that every professor must take before being allowed access to students in Hogwarts," began Harry, and he was sure he could feel Dumbledore glow at him from behind. "No duly appointed professor can hurt a student physically or sexually or stand back and allow a student to get hurt in such manner. All accusations against Professor Dumbledore of having exposed me to a troll and a basilisk are false because his oath would not allow it. The only professor who hasn't taken this oath here is Junior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, who has been sent by Minister Scrimgeour to discredit Headmaster Dumbledore. The Minister knows how weak his hold in the Wizengamot is, and is using such underhanded means to sway support. That's what I believe is happening. I call for the Minister to resign due to his outrageous, unfounded and false allegations on Chief Warlock Dumbledore. He is clearly unfit to lead the government."

"Why, you Mudblood..." Umbridge began, raising her wand towards him, and Harry couldn't believe how easy this was. Dumbledore swiftly waved his hand, and a silver platter rose as a shield between Harry to the curse sent at him by Umbridge.

And that was the main picture in the newspaper the next morning. Scrimgeour's representative to Hogwarts, Dolores Umbridge, was attacking Harry Potter while Dumbledore rose up in Harry's defence, with a full quote of what Harry had stated. Striking while the iron was hot, Amelia Bones called for an immediate motion of no-confidence in the Ministry, and nearly all of Diggory's supporters voted for Amelia, feeling betrayed by Amos Diggory's alliance with Scrimgeour.

By nightfall, Chief Warlock Dumbledore invited Amelia Bones, who enjoyed an overwhelming majority support in the Wizengamot, to reform the Ministry of Magic.

Harry, however, had other things in his mind.

"I think you might have made a mistake somewhere."

Harry flashed an annoyed look at Hermione. He was with Hermione and Neville in the common room and had been carving the runes on the golden ring by transfiguring the top end of his wand into an appropriate tool.

The reason for Hermione's doubt was that the ring, instead of turning the wearer invisible, was puking green goo in all directions, and mostly on the wearer – Harry himself. Even when he removed it, the ring started flying around in all directions, throwing the goo out.

Neville, however, was delighted. He was under the impression that the green goo would make excellent fertiliser for magical plants and refused to let Harry stop it while he collected the goo.

They heard the trapdoor to the girls' dorms open and Ginny stepped down with a yawn. She saw the commotion and raised her wand, transfigured the ring into a slab of wood and banished it into the fire, without even thinking about it.

"You've really got the Anti-Inertia transfiguration nailed to the hilt," Harry remarked. "Dumbledore couldn't have handled that better."

Ginny blushed at his praise. "Hermione, can I borrow your transfiguration textbook? I'd like to read ahead on conjuration."

Harry and Neville exchanged glances when Hermione left them to help Ginny find the books she wanted.

"Isn't proper conjuration sixth year material?" asked Neville slowly.

Harry nodded. He looked grave.

Neville understood Harry's concerns very well. "We have two of them now," he stated plainly. "Two Hermiones." He shuddered and made a sign to ward off evil.

He returned to his task of making the runes on the gold. It took him three attempts to finally get it done. The runes flared in deep red

before fading out of sight. He was excited. That's what was supposed to happen. The runes disappearing indicated the invisibility effect was transferred into the ring.

He referred to the notes he had made from the library earlier. The ring, now, was merely an adequate focus. It had the properties to store the Disillusionment Charm. There were two ways Harry could proceed on this. First, to simply cast the charm on it and cut his magical supply so that until the focus remained in force, the wearer of the ring would turn invisible. Or else, he could do something more challenging at give it an activation code.

"Just stick to the standard technique," Neville advised. "Find a Latin word close in meaning and distort it to something that sounds nice."

"Is that what spell creators do?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Of course. Spell creators, potions masters and herbologists," said Neville. "You don't expect them to waste time learning proper grammar in different languages, do you?"

Harry shrugged. What Neville said made sense.

"Caecus means blind," said Neville, flicking through his Latin dictionary. "Abeo means to go away."

"Abeo sounds nicer," said Harry. "Abeo hominis."

He then pointed his wand at the ring and cast the Disillusionment Charm, while focusing his mind also on the activation code. The runes on the ring flared in deep red for a brief moment before going away.

"Okay, here goes nothing," said Harry. "If something happens to me..."

"I'll get Madam Pomfrey," Neville promised.

Harry slipped the ring onto his finger. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes and thought, 'Abeo Hominis.'

He heard Neville gasp in shock. "He did it," Neville muttered, sounding startled and delighted at the same time.

"Finite," Harry said, but it didn't work. He didn't reappear. He suddenly panicked. "Finite Incantatem." Still nothing. "Uh... Neville... can you hear me?"

"Yes, Harry."

"I uh... I think I forgot to put on a deactivation code," said Harry sheepishly.

Neville rolled his eyes. "Just remove the ring, Harry."

Harry felt like hitting himself. He removed the ring and became visible. "That works." He tossed the ring up in the air and caught it.

"Do I get one?" asked Neville.

Harry shrugged and tossed the ring to Neville. "Don't tell anyone about it. And don't even think about peeking on Susan in the shower." Hesitating, he added, "Or Ginny. Or Hermione."

Neville chuckled. "I assure you I have no such intentions." He shook his head. "I can't believe this. You performed an Auror level spell and transferred it to a secondary focus while allocating an activation code to it; without breaking into sweat."

"I'm just that good," said Harry proudly.

A few days later, Harry stared glumly from his seat in the Three Broomsticks as Ginny stormed away from the table with Anthony Goldstein.

"Great going," Susan said quietly.

"I didn't mean to insult Anthony or offend Ginny," Harry said pitifully.

"You're lucky I know you didn't," said Susan. "But your attitude towards him would suggest otherwise to everyone else. Ginny's going to be angry with you."

Harry sighed.

"Let's go back to the castle," said Susan. "The mood's ruined."

Harry looked at her regretfully. "How can I make it up to you?"

Susan looked at him contemplatively. "You can help me in my project," she said. "I was trying to get one of the second years to volunteer but they were all... busy."

"Sure," Harry promised. "What do I have to do?"

"Nothing," Susan looked at him evilly. "You sit in one place while I heal you."

"Heal me? From what?" asked Harry curiously. "There's nothing wrong with me." He caught her look and balked visibly.

"There's nothing wrong with you... yet," she said, standing up, and literally dragging him back to the castle and into the Hufflepuff common room. "Sit there," she ordered. "And I don't want a peep out of you."

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry.

"Not a peep!" Susan said. "Petrificus. Good." She laughed evilly.

Her project was to learn all the basic healing spells a healer needed to know. And in order to practice those spells, someone needed to first get hurt. And that someone was Harry.

Half an hour later, Harry looked at her with irritation. "I can't believe you did that," he complained, rubbing his arm.

Susan looked at him with disbelief. "I break your bones and fix it, you're fine with that. I induce illness on you with Fred and George's sickening sweets and treat you, you're fine with that. I wound you and heal the wound, you're fine with that. But when I remove your shirt, you start squealing like a six year old girl?"

"You were taking advantage of me," Harry muttered.

Susan laughed. "I only poked your belly button once." Harry pouted. "Besides, I'm your girlfriend. I have that right."



"Oh, yeah?" Harry looked at her with an evil grin of his own. "So, by that logic, I can remove your clothes and poke you too?"

Susan's smile faded. She turned very red.

Harry suddenly realised what he had just said. "Oh, shit. I didn't mean it like that..."

"You mean you don't want to..." Susan looked even unhappier.

"I do!" Harry exclaimed and saw Susan narrow her eyes. "Aargh!" he yelled. "There's no right answer, is there?"

Susan decided to show mercy and stopped tormenting him. "Just teasing."

"Why, you little..." Harry grabbed her arms and pinned her on the couch, tickling her mercilessly.

"Harry, stop... please..." she was laughing. "Stop... enough... I'm sorry... don't... please stop... Stop it, Harry!"

Suddenly, Harry felt something hit his head and his vision swam around. The last thing he saw was the sneer on Zacharias Smith's face and everything turned black.

Harry blinked. He opened his eyes. Everything was dark. He blinked a few times and recognised where he was. The medical wing. He groaned.

"He's up," Neville's voice fell on his ears. "Ginny, he's up."

Harry rubbed his eyes.

"Here," Ginny helped him wear his glasses.

"What happened?" Harry asked. "Where am I?"

"Mate, you were attacked from behind by Zacharias Smith," said Neville. "He got you with a Reducto, close range."

Harry looked ahead grimly.

"There's some rumours that he was under the Imperius Curse from Umbridge," said Neville. "But nobody knows for sure. Susan's been distraught."

"Is she okay?" asked Harry.

"She's just worried," said Ginny. "We all are. This is your second night here."

"Oh." Harry rubbed his head and sat up.

"Pomfrey threw us out hours ago. We used those rings you made to sneak out," said Neville. "Do you need anything?"

Harry shook his head.

"Don't be ridiculous. You need food, water and a lot of rest," said Ginny. "Neville, can you get some water?"

Harry turned to Ginny the moment Neville had left. "I'm sorry about Anthony," he said.

"Shh." Ginny looked at him irritably. "Just get better..."

"I was a complete arse," said Harry.

"I know," said Ginny. "Now, just get better. If you want, I'll practice healing spells on you as well. But first get better."

"I promise I'll be nicer to Anthony from now on," said Harry. "Or anyone else you want to be with. I was afraid I'd lose you."

Ginny sighed. She turned to Neville. "Neville, can I hit Harry on his head?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Neville. "He's fragile right now."

"Please?" Ginny said hopefully. "Just a little one."

"Oh, fine. He deserves it," said Neville. "I'm closing my eyes."

"Gee, thanks, Neville," Harry said sarcastically while the redhead whacked his head. "You're a good friend."

"You deserved that. You have been a real arse lately," Neville justified himself harshly. "Smug, selfish and self-indulgent."

Harry looked crestfallen at those words.

"Hermione, for instance," said Neville. "You've spoken to her five times all term... and always about your project or hers and nothing else, not even a, 'Hey, Hermione, what happened between you and Krum? Are you holding up fine?' Ron... you've not gone with him even once to help him practice for the Keeper trials. Ginny..."

"That's enough, Neville. This isn't the right time," said Ginny quietly. "We should leave now." She got up but faltered on seeing Harry's miserable face. She returned to kiss his forehead. "Go to sleep, Harry. Susan will be here in the morning."

But before Susan, it was Dumbledore and the four heads of houses who had come to see him.

"Alas, the rumours have no substance," said Dumbledore. "Mr Smith was acting completely of his own volition and has been punished. His Quidditch and Hogsmeade privileges are revoked for the rest of the term and he was given three weeks of detention."

"It was decided," McGonagall continued, "to hold back more serious punishment until you woke up."

"Do I get a say?" Harry was surprised.

Dumbledore nodded. "It was one of my first promises to Amelia Bones when she became Minister. Any serious incident, if the victim or those closest to the victim, so desire, will be put in Ministry hands immediately. If you wish to report this matter, I have no doubt that Mr Smith will be expelled from Hogwarts."

For a long moment, Harry was tempted. Smith had been a pain to him for a year now. But Neville's words rang in his ears. He himself had become exactly what he had blamed Ron and Hermione for the previous year. He had alienated Ron, Hermione and perhaps Ginny and Neville. Susan was the only person who still wasn't annoyed

with him. Getting her former friend punished, despite how tempting it sounded, if it risked alienating Susan, just wasn't worth it. He had to hold back, to take stock of what was happening to him, otherwise he could end up losing everyone.

"No," Harry said finally. He saw Dumbledore smile at him. "Don't look at me like that." He snapped at Dumbledore, which shocked all the other professors gathered around him, and by then Susan had also appeared. "I'm not doing this for any noble reasons..."

"Very well," said Dumbledore, reducing the intensity of his smile to comply with Harry's request. "Perhaps we should leave these two young people to themselves."

"Thanks," Susan said, taking his hand. "He attacked you because he thought you were forcing yourself on me. I would have felt terrible if he was expelled because of this."

Harry felt something lurch within him. He was lying on a hospital bed and Susan was expressing concern for the person who had sent him there. He turned his head away, unable to hold back a tear. Everything was crumbling around him. All his friends. Susan.

"Harry, I didn't mean to defend him," Susan sounded terrible. "Please, look at me." When Harry didn't budge, Susan got up. "Fine, have it your way." She got up and left.

When Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, reality hit him. Susan had left. He looked around. Ron and Hermione were kissing each other on a couch. Ginny was nowhere. Neville didn't raise his head to acknowledge him.

He saw a list was posted for the Quidditch team and it showed Cormac McLaggen as Gryffindor's Keeper. Harry felt awful when he realised he had completely missed the whole thing, despite promising Ron he would help him with some practice drills. He walked to his room and felt a sudden urge to hide under his blanket. Neville was correct, he had acted terribly all year.

But instead of going to sleep, he took out all the things he needed for his project.

"Dobby," Harry called out.

The house elf appeared. "Harry Potter calls Dobby," he sounded pleased.

Again, Harry felt awful. He hadn't been to visit his non-student friends Dobby or Hagrid since coming to Hogwarts. And now when he did call the house-elf, it was with an ulterior purpose. "How are you, Dobby?"

"Dobby is good," said he. "Dobby is teaching Winky to be a free elf."

"I need your help," said Harry, and Dobby looked even more delighted. "Is there somewhere in Hogwarts I can work and study without anyone being able to find me? Someplace very private and suitable for my needs. "

"The Come and Go room," said Dobby. The house-elf gave directions to Harry how to find the biggest secret of Hogwarts, which the house-elves were instinctively aware of but not allowed to tell anyone, not even the Headmaster. But Dobby was a free elf and nobody could stop him from helping Harry Potter.

Harry entered the room. He was surprised by its interior. It looked like an old Victorian library, plush yet workable. There were even half a dozen cauldrons in one end over burning fires.

"Wow," Harry was impressed. But the biggest surprise came when he saw the books in the bookshelf.

Advanced Charms, Arithmany for Beginners, Advanced Arithmancy, Putting a Focus in Your Charm, Hogwarts OWL Projects were the ones that stuck out as the most relevant for his current need. All his requirements were being met by the room automatically.

Harry sat down and started working. He started out by rereading his mother's project report again to soothe his mood. That made him smile. She was a hard worker. But then his smile faltered. Would she be proud of how Harry had treated his friends?

Harry filtered those thoughts away. The Imperturbable Charm was not easy to learn, especially in his negative mind-set. But he had been practising it for over a fortnight before his accident and it was

coming along steadily. Other than the Patronus Charm, no other spell had taken him so long to learn. But now he was learning it with a new vigour. He needed the protection of the charm.

Neville was right. He had been selfish and self-indulgent and very smug. He had forgotten something very important. Something more important than exams, magic and love. Something more important than his friendships. He had forgotten his destiny. He had chosen politics over Voldemort. That was his first mistake.

"I really wish I knew why Voldemort is after me," Harry said out loud. He frowned when he felt the magic of the room ripple around him. A new book popped into existence in the bookshelf. Harry reached for it.

The Book of Prophecies.

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. He opened the book and read through the prophecies. The first one he read was of Arthur, the son of the dragon, the once and future king. He smiled when he read that, taking heart from the glorious history of England.

He moved on. There was a prophecy marked 'the Prophecy of the Slayer' which read: into each generation a Slayer is born: one girl, a chosen one. She will wield the strength and skill to fight vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness.

"Yikes," said Harry, swiftly moving through; he had never been happier that he wasn't a girl. The prophecies were grim and more often than not bestowed a grim destiny on those it spoke of. Finally, he found the one he was looking for. It was marked Sybil Trelawney to Albus Dumbledore, concerning Tom Marvolo Riddle and Harry James Potter.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

Harry jumped back in shock and fear. "Either must die at the hand of the other," he repeated. He had to kill Voldemort, or he would be

killed in return. "For neither can live while the other survives." He would not find peace or happiness until he succeeded.

Harry lowered his head. He wasn't truly living, was he? Every year since he came to Hogwarts, except this one so far, he had fought dark wizards and monsters, he had escaped life and death situations by mere luck and nothing more. Except last year, when he finally made the effort to start learning, he had held his own.

Why had he done that? Because he was alone. Just like now.

"For neither can live while the other survives," he repeated. He was not allowed to live until he had fulfilled his destiny. Harry shut the Book of Prophecies and raised his wand, repeating the motion for the Imperturbable Charm with a new determination.

Days passed and the Come and Go room became his regular retreat. He would go there early in the morning with all the things he needed for lessons through the day, and during free periods, or after lessons had ended and until curfew, he would go to the Come and Go room. It pained him after the first few days to realise that nobody really noticed his long absences.

Ginny was seeing Anthony Goldstein and they were busy in their own world. Neville, who was having a minor fight of his own with Hannah, always assumed Harry was with Susan. Ron and Hermione, although civil when they met, didn't particularly try too hard to spend time with him. Just like he hadn't tried too hard to spend time with them all year, and the previous one.

And Susan.

Harry would often catch her eye during meals but that would be the most contact they'd have. She didn't seem too friendly with Zacharias Smith but was, in Harry's opinion, a bit too close to Justin.

Harry forced himself to focus on his learning. Not having a Defence professor gave him more time to work on his training and project.

Soon, the project report was over nine pages long. He started with an introduction briefly summarising his mother's work. Then he highlighted the conjecture she had left unexplored – using an activation code to get the charms working, and made it his main aim.

Then, he referenced to her table of charms and suitable foci, thereby justifying the three he had chosen.

The main body of his report was divided into three sections – for each of the charms, and Harry first developed the principles of the charm and how he learned to perform them, and then the process of making each focus. He kept the structure of his report similar to that of his mother's.

The Disillusionment Charm was the first he had completed. It worked flawlessly. It also helped him move around the castle without encountering anyone else. The Patronus Charm was the next one which he had planned to do, as the stone had been in the potion for the required period of a month.

Harry placed the stone on the table and frowned. How inconvenient. He should have used something more usable, like a chain or a bracelet. But he sighed. There was no other choice, because he would have to write to Sirius to send more ingredients, make the potion again and wait another month. He didn't want to spend so much time just for aesthetics.

"Expecto Patronum," said Harry. To his shock, nothing happened. Harry blinked in dismay. He had been thinking about Sirius being free. How could that not be a happy thought? He tried again. This time he used a memory of him kissing Susan, but he knew that was going to fail even before he finished the two words.

Even the mere thought of Susan was more likely to send him to depression than create a Patronus.

He tried thinking of Ginny, but even that didn't work. Neville. Hermione. Dumbledore. Surviving Voldemort. Kicking Pettigrew. Nothing worked. He was distressed on realising how empty he had become.

Finally, Harry thought of something. A strange warmth came inside him. If that didn't work, he might as well give up on the Patronus Charm. Someone who could never disappoint him; someone he could never hurt.

"Norberta," Harry thought with a smile, thinking of the dragon playfully chasing after him as he flew on his Firebolt. In his memory



he saw Ginny laugh at him while Charlie held her a safe distance back from the dragon and the insane boy.

But there was nothing insane about Norberta. The dragon knew he wasn't of her kind but she still accepted him. Unconditionally. That was the kind of acceptance he yearned for and was so willing to give to others. That was how he should have been with Susan, and Ginny, and everyone else.

"Expecto Patronum," he whispered. He felt the rush of magic, and his stag Patronus appeared, nuzzling his face with its cool silvery magic.

"Prongs," Harry whispered. "You can understand me?"

Prongs simply looked at him, waiting for him to continue. But the stag was a reflection of his soul. It knew Harry.

"You know what I'm about to do," said Harry. The stag bobbed its head. "Will it hurt you?"

The stag shook his head.

"You will come when I call?" asked Harry, hopefully. "Even if I don't have a happy memory to summon you?"

The stag looked at him sadly and nuzzled his head again. It then lowered its head and charged to the small pebble and disappeared within it.

Harry felt a sudden feeling of loss when Prongs disappeared and he rushed to the pebble. "Prongs," he called out, holding the pebble. The stag emerged from the stone. Harry sighed in relief. The stag waited several moments for him to say anything before returning to the pebble.

Harry smiled happily. He had done it. For whatever reasons, his mother and Snape had embarked on this project together but they had given up, and his mother moved to other smaller things to do, and Snape perhaps didn't think twice of the potion that he may have wasted a whole year in inventing. But he had done it.

He wanted to shout that out. He wanted to tell it to someone, that he had finished his mother's project. But there was nobody to listen to him. Except, one. For some reason that he couldn't fully explain, Harry found himself walking towards the dungeons. Midway, he thought he saw Susan around the corner and started rushing after her, but when he turned, there was no one there.

Except Peeves.

"Potty!" the poltergeist had an arsenal of dung bomb in his arms.

"Peevsey, I'm not in the mood," Harry said glumly, looking apologetically at the poltergeist.

"Potty is upset." Peeves sank to the floor and joined Harry at his level. "Should Peevsey sing to Potty?"

"No, thanks. I'll be fine." He hesitated. "Did you see Susan here?"

"Potty's girlfriend?"

Harry felt his heart lurch. "I don't know if she still thinks of herself as that..."

"Do you?" asked Peeves, with wisdom that nobody would have expected to hear from the poltergeist.

Harry was surprised by the question. He looked at Peeves with a disturbed expression. "I want to," he said. "But there's so much going on... so much that I need to do..." Harry could have sworn he felt something move past him but he shook himself. He had taken away the invisibility rings from Neville until after his project.

He left to continue on his path. Soon, he was knocking on Snape's door. He never thought he would be doing that, but there it was. Harry Potter voluntarily knocked on Severus Snape's door.

"Potter, what do you want? I have no time for your foolishness."

"I did it," Harry blurted out.

Snape was looking at him as if he were a flobberworm trying to fight a dragon. "Speak intelligibly, if it is in the capability of dunderheads such as yourself."

Harry flushed. He took out the pebble and held it firmly in his hand. "Prongs," he said, and the stag appeared. For a moment, Harry feared for his life. Snape's face twisted in a mix of fury and hatred, and Harry took a step back.

For several seconds neither spoke, while the stag remained majestically in their presence. Harry stared at Snape with a desperate expression.

"I see," Snape finally said. "Where, pray, may I ask, did you prepare the potion?"

"An empty classroom," Harry said. "Ginny Weasley helped me."

"That explains it, I suppose," said Snape. He sat down and took a deep breath. "Remove your Patronus from my sight, Potter." He looked troubled and was staring outside the window.

Harry held the pebble up and Prongs returned inside it.

"Professor," Harry began.

"Be silent," Snape snapped. He was rubbing his forehead. He was quiet for nearly a minute. "She was my first and perhaps my only true friend."

"My mother?" Harry asked. He was shocked.

"Lily." Snape sounded almost pained to mention her name. "But if you are looking for tales of her, then you have come to the wrong person. I betrayed her trust... I betrayed Lily..."

Harry felt a sudden rage against Snape, but then he recalled something. "Dumbledore disagrees," he said.

Snape turned to Harry with tremendous speed. "Be that as it may, some things cannot be spoken of. Memories are too painful."

Harry lowered his face. He had devoted himself completely to the project, wanting some nearness with his mother, but now even that didn't seem enough. He stood up. "Thank you for your time, professor."

Before he could leave, however, the fire flared in Snape's office. Somebody was on the floo.

"Severus," Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice came. "Alert Dumbledore. Students in the Department of Mysteries... The Minister's niece, the youngest Weasleys and two others... Death Eaters..."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face.

Snape rushed out of his seat and grabbed Harry's collars. "I will petrify you and lock you in this room if you even think of leaving this castle, Potter."

"But... I must," Harry cried out. "They've got Susan... and the others."

Snape didn't say anything. He whipped his wand out. "Petrificus." He then locked the door and left.

Harry frowned to himself. For a few minutes he remained frozen in his place, petrified completely below his head, and then an idea came to him. "Dobby," he called.

The house-elf appeared. "Harry Potter is stuck?" Dobby was outraged. The elf snapped his fingers. "Harry Potter is free."

"Dobby, do you know a quick way to the Ministry of Magic?" asked Harry urgently. "My friends are in danger. I have to help them."

"But Harry Potter will get hurt!" Dobby protested. "Dobby can't..."

"Dobby, listen to me," Harry said seriously. "Do you remember how you tried to save me despite having to punish yourself for doing so?"

"Yes," said Dobby. "But it was worth it."

Harry didn't quite agree but he wasn't about to argue. "This is the same. I have to go, and although I may get hurt, I have to help them. I need your help."

"Dobby can't... Dobby mustn't..."

"Dobby," Harry grabbed his shoulders urgently. "How can I become the great wizard you think I should be if I don't go to help my friends when they need me? If you're a true friend to me, you will not keep me safe in a cage but rather help me do what I have to!"

Dobby's eyes widened. "Dobby understands. Harry Potter is great only as long as he keeps doing great things. Dobby has a plan." Dobby vanished.

Harry sighed in relief, but then he hesitated. Dobby had a plan. Somehow, those plans had the effect of breaking his bones or nearly expelling him from Hogwarts. But that was the best he had at the time. He looked at what he had with him. His wand. His invisibility ring, his Patronus stone. He looked around the room and quickly grabbed a handful of potions that might prove useful, casting an unbreakable charm on the vials.

Then, Dobby returned. With a struggling phoenix.

"Fox will help Harry Potter!" Dobby was saying sternly. The phoenix protested and looked rather startled. "Fox is bad phoenix. Fox doesn't care that Harry Potter's friends will get hurt. Bad Fox."

Harry was stunned. He could only look at the wrestling house-elf and phoenix in a complete daze. At one point, Fawkes flared up and Harry could note the tell-tale signs of the phoenix about to travel by fire, but Dobby clapped his hand and the bird was doused in water and started sputtering.

"Fawkes," Harry said. The two stopped fighting and turned to him. "Do you remember Ginny?" The phoenix regarded Harry silently. "You saved us in the Chamber of Secrets. You saved my life there, and hers. She is in danger again. And others. Susan... I miss her so much, Fawkes, please help me. Take me to them."

The phoenix trilled.

"Good Fox." Dobby let go of the phoenix, as if he had understood the phoenix. He then came to Harry's side and grabbed his leg. Then Fawkes flew to Harry and clutched his shoulders. There was a flare of phoenix fire and the small group disappeared.

The next moment Harry saw a terrible sight. His closest friends – Ginny, Susan, Neville, Hermione and Ron were cornered in a strange chamber by Death Eaters, in their black robes and silver masks. There was a strange Veil in the middle of the room and his friends were dangerously close to it.

What made Harry's insides boil with anger was that Ginny was on the floor and there was blood on her leg. Susan was with her, trying to get her up. But there were three Death Eaters too close to them, with wands raised.

But all activity stopped when Harry arrived. It was like time had frozen for a moment, and then it resumed. Ginny's face relaxed on seeing Harry; but Susan's scrunched in terror.

"HARRY, NO!" Susan screamed at the top of her lungs. "THIS IS A TRAP! GO AWAY!"

Despite the fear and pain in her voice, it sounded like music to him. Harry raised his wand. The Death Eaters were also distracted. Their apparent leader walked towards Harry.

"Mr Potter, what a pleasant surprise," he said politely.

"Mr Malfoy, I wish I could say the same," said Harry.

"I see our Lord wasn't mistaken," said Malfoy. "You are as foolish as he though you would be; running after pitiful school children."

Harry's blood drained from his face.

"But you aren't as foolish as them, it seems," said Malfoy, seeing the horror on his face. "You understand what I mean."

"He's back," Harry whispered, and his voice broke.

"It was always a matter of time," said Malfoy. "Azkaban was broken earlier today, the Ministry was attacked, the Dementors have already come to us, victory will be ours."

"Then," Harry frowned. "Why this? Why bring them here?" He was aware that Dobby had moved towards Ginny and was tying a cloth over her wound.

"A necessary evil," sighed Malfoy. "I would have spared the children, if I could. Well, the pureblood and halfblood children, at least. Amelia's niece will be a strong bargaining chip, perhaps a betrothal between her and Draco will please my Lord."

Harry snarled.

Malfoy laughed. "How predictable. I only jest. She will be no more than a puppet, a plaything, for my brethren. As will your other friends. Unless..."

Harry knew he had to stall them. There were nearly eight Death Eaters there. But help was on the way. Kingsley knew of this, which meant they would be trying to break through whatever outer defences the Death Eaters had and trying to come to them. He had to stall Malfoy.

"Unless... what?"

"My Lord requires something," said Malfoy. "Give it to us and your friends will go free. So will you. At least, for now."

That was almost too good to be true. Harry would take that deal. He wasn't ready to face them yet.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"There's a prophecy..."

Harry couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing before Malfoy could continue. "Seriously?" he taunted, knowing it was a very foolish thing to do. "You call him a Dark Lord... he can't even take one step without making a fuss about knowing what some hag said in a drug-induced craze? Ickle Tommy is scared?"

Malfoy's politeness vanished. "You mock the greatest sorcerer of our time," he drawled. "Perhaps a small lesson in manners is in order."

"He is not," Harry said quietly, recalling eerily a similar conversation in his second year. "Albus Dumbledore is the greatest sorcerer of our time, not Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Crucio."

Harry leapt aside. Kingsley and Gawain had trained him for a few weeks, and although he wasn't even half as good as them, he wasn't weak. "Expulso," he aimed at Malfoy. "Confringo," at the one closest to Ginny and Susan. "Diffindo. Geminio Decimus."

"Interesting." Malfoy looked more amused than anything. "You know how to play. This will be fun. But alas, I am not permitted to kill you." He looked at the Death Eater closest to Ginny, he was the only one who had struck. "Not even for the face hit you got on poor old Crabbe."

Ten clones of Harry walked simultaneously, and Harry moved with them. The Death Eaters started attacking at random, but the clones just kept scampering around. Harry purposefully didn't cast a spell either as it would give away which one he truly was, and slowly shifted his position for a better access to the Death Eaters while shielding the others. He was annoyed that Fawkes disappeared after leaving him and Dobby, for some reason, wasn't able to teleport the others out.

"Harry, duck," Susan called out, and Harry instinctively ducked. He saw a red jet of light miss his head by inches, and was shocked how Susan had managed to know which one he truly was.

"Enough!" a female Death Eater yelled. "Reveal yourself or the Minister's niece dies." She pointed her wand at Susan.

Harry didn't know he could someone as much as he hated that Death Eater. "Leave," Harry released the magic holding the clones.

"That was fun, little Harry," she said in a singsong voice. "But Bella's here to play."



Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry's courage faltered. Even Kingsley had feared the madwoman in front of them. But the reason why Harry's courage faltered was...

"You were in Azkaban!" Neville screamed furiously. "You monster!"

Harry didn't know what grudge Neville had against her but he took that momentary distraction to his advantage. He cast the Imperturbable Charm around Susan and Ginny, and then Hermione. Ron and Neville would have to look after themselves, because Harry had to dodge a curse sent by another Death Eater.

But then others appeared. Harry felt a big load off his chest when he saw Kingsley's face, Gawain, Ludo Bagman, Remus Lupin, Severus Snape, Arthur Weasley, Percy Weasley, and... Sirius Black!

"Harry!" Sirius sounded agitated. He sent three curses with unbelievable ferocity at the Death Eaters before they could even raise their wands. He fought like a madman to reach his godson. "Snape said he locked you in... You're not supposed to be here..."

Harry relaxed slightly. The Death Eaters were fully occupied by the new group, and Harry knelt to Ginny and Susan. "How can you ask me to leave my friends behind?" He saw Susan avert his gaze but Ginny raised her head and something passed between them. A feeling of camaraderie. It was almost as if she had expected him to come.

And Sirius accepted that.

Harry looked at Susan. She was trembling. "Did they hurt you?" he whispered. He kept his gaze on the battle and his wand was raised, but he wasn't joining in. He was staying with the others, in case one of the Death Eaters broke through and targeted them.

"Rosier got her with a Cruciatus Curse," Ron said gravely. "He got Ginny as well."

Harry abandoned all plans to stay defensive. "Which one is Rosier?" he said quietly.

"Harry, don't," said Ginny. "Let the Aurors handle it. Stay with us."

Surely, more Aurors and a few Unspeakables were rushing into the chamber and the Death Eaters were finding themselves overwhelmed.

"Retreat!" Malfoy snarled. He vanished. The Death Eaters started disappearing. But before they could leave, Bellatrix Lestrange sent a hurling curse towards Harry.

"Not Harry!" Ginny screamed, and with all her strength, she stood up and pushed Harry out of its path. The curse hit her and sent her flying backwards... through the Veil.

Once again, time froze in front of Harry as he saw Ginny's face as she fell through. It was like she moved in slow motion. Harry himself was frozen. And then he tried to reach for her.

Only to be held back. Harry didn't know who it was, perhaps Lupin or Snape. They were both the same – friends of his parents who didn't see him anything more than an object to be pitied and locked in a safe place. Sirius wouldn't have stopped Harry. If Harry had gone through the Veil, Sirius would simply have followed. But Lupin and Snape were responsible adults.

Meanwhile, Ginny fell. The Veil sizzled for a moment and then it was like nothing had happened. There was silence and an unholy peace.

Harry couldn't think. He wasn't thinking. He didn't want to think. At times like this, thinking was not necessary. He had been in such situations before. And he had lived. More importantly, he had saved her. He had to do it again. Thinking was not going to help. He had to act. He had to save her.

He had to save Ginny. He looked at his wand. It was all he had. Even the stone had fallen somewhere. Stone. Patronus. Wand. He wasn't at all concerned if it worked or not; if he stopped to think, it would be too late. He had to do it. He raised his wand towards the Veil; and finally understood the secret. It wasn't about happiness. It wasn't about purity. It wasn't even about love. A Patronus was about the soul's most urgent need. He needed to save Ginny. That was it. He needed to save Ginny. "Expecto Patronum," Harry screamed.

His Patronus burst through. Not Prongs; the stag was safely captured within the pebble. But the human soul is incredible, and his soul needed to save Ginny.

Norberta the dragon burst through the tip of his wand and raced through the Veil. Perhaps only two seconds passed, but it felt like an eternity to Harry, and then Norberta returned. Triumphantly. Roaring with all the might of a dragon, and Ginny on her back, with her arms around the dragon's neck.

Harry couldn't say a word as his Patronus dropped Ginny in front of him, and then, with a nod of its massive head, the dragon vanished.

"H-Harry," Ginny was trembling. She sounded shocked to see him.

Harry pulled her to his arms and held her protectively. "I don't leave my friends behind," he said calmly. He didn't know why, but it was important for him to be calm and confident. Ginny needed him to be like that.

Ginny remained quiet for a long moment. "My hero," she said finally, before fainting. Her father and brothers went to her and gathered around her protectively. She was well looked after.

Harry took that moment to walk to Susan. She wasn't looking at him, as if afraid of what he was going to say. And then he knew it. Susan had overheard him with Peeves, when he had been circumspect about their relationship. He didn't know how or why, but he knew. It was almost as if he had seen through her soul.

He hesitated. The prophecy was between them. ...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... How could he condemn Susan to this burden he held? How could he make her a target.

But she was already a target. He didn't know how or why the five of them were in the Department of Mysteries, but they were there first. Not him. The Death Eaters had targeted them. And through them, they had targeted him. They would always be their first target, despite anything he did to prevent that.

Suddenly, he remembered his own taunt to Lucius Malfoy. "He can't even take one step without making a fuss about knowing what was

predicted." A prophecy had no right to dictate terms in his life. A prophecy could not take his choices away.

He started laughing.

Susan whipped her head towards him, staring at him with wide eyes.

"We've been so stupid," he said. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, taking advantage of her surprise, and ignoring the cheers and catcalls from the Aurors and Unspeakables.

Notes:

1. There's been a slight delay, mainly because I lost some steam while trying to write the Department of Mysteries scene, as many of you will know I haven't really had any battle scenes before this. I hope it is satisfactory?

2. Many have written to me about how unnatural it is for two 14-15 years to become so close to each other and remain together for a long time. Umm... it isn't that unnatural for them to try.

3. I really like your reviews! Please, don't stop. :)